

ORAL HISTORY

Readers: Please sign form
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SONIA BALTRUN KAROSS

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Women in California Collection

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CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

Oral History of

Sonia Baltrun Kaross

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STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON

SONIA BALTRUN KAROSS

For the California Historical Society
Women in California Collection

Oral History Interview

Name SONIA BALTRUN KAROSS Date of Birth May 30, 1901Place of birth Lithuania (Formerly Imperial Russia)Name of husband Joseph KarossDate of marriage July 4, 1918 Place of Marriage Philadelphia

If marriage terminated, when _____

If remarried, name of husband _____

Date of remarriage _____

Place _____

ChildrenName Eugenia Volga Date of Birth Oct. 10, 1921

Name _____ Date of Birth _____

Name _____ Date of Birth _____

Name _____ Date of Birth _____

ParentsMother (maiden name) Antanina KudrauskasWhere born Lithuania Date of Birth ?Date of Death March 1967Father's name Rafael BaltrunWhere born Lithuania Date of Birth ?Date of Death July 1915Date of Marriage ? Place of Marriage LithuaniaGrandparentsMother's sideName of father Did not know themDate of birth ? Date of Death ?Name of Mother (maiden) ?Date of birth ? Date of Death ?

(see next page)

Stateistical information on _____

Grandparents (cont'd)

Father's side

Name of father Did not know them
Date of Birth ? Date of Death ?
Name of Mother (maiden) ?
Date of birth ? Date of Death ?

My Brothers and Sisters

Name Joseph Baltrun Date of Birth Apr. 1904
Date of Death June 1942
Name William Baltrun Date of Birth _____
Date of Death May 1966
Name _____ Date of Birth _____
Date of Death _____

Comments _____

November 18, 1977

TRANSCRIPTION

Oral History of SONIA BALTRUN KAROSS

Born, Sonia Baltrun, on May 30, 1901, in Lithuania.
Now living in her home in San Leandro, California

Dates of interview:

July 23, 1977
August 3, 1977
August 10, 1977
August 25, 1977
September 1, 1977
October 13, 1977
November 3, 1977

Approximate number of hours interviewed: 13½.

This is one of a series of interviews being conducted by the California Historical Society Library for its Women in California Collection. This section, when concluded, will consist of a number of interviews with both women trade unionists and left wing women of the early part of the century, right after the fight for suffrage was won.

Louise Lambert, another interviewee, says of Sonia Baltrun that "she was always a very modest person despite her manifest abilities." The narrator has learned that the Lithuanian women with whom Sonia Baltrun worked since her youth adore her. She had evidently never used her authority to separate herself from the membership of her union or the other organizations to which she is affiliated. She has often been at bazaars washing dishes, and has frequently participated in the routine work such as distribution of leaflets, door to door work in the community, etc.

Although she worked a brief stint as a full time Communist, she felt it unnecessary to discuss this period of her life from the point of view of inner party work. This did not inhibit her, however, from talking of her friendship with Anita Whitney, nor of her open activities as a street corner speaker and a participant in the unemployment demonstrations of the early thirties.

She is the author of four books, all in the Lithuanian language:

Women for Socialism, published in 1935 by the Lithuanian Language Press.

Women and War, published in 1944 in Chicago by Vilnic, a Lithuanian language paper's press.

International Women's Day and Women's Struggle for Emancipation, published in 1946 in Chicago by Vilnic.

Around the World for Peace, published in 1958 by the U.S.S.R. in Lithuanian

None of these books have been translated into English.

At present Sonia Baltrun Kaross is heavily involved in the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Friendship Committee. She is also a member in long standing of Women for Peace, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In addition she is a member of the Lithuanian Literary Society and the Lithuanian Workers Association.

In the course of the interview, I found Mrs. Kaross to be extremely reticent to speak of her own activities. For instance, although she gave over 18 pints of blood during World War II, she was not going to mention it until asked. She said she never wanted to "blow her own horn." Because she is so modest, the interview often consists of short and to the point answers instead of long narratives. An example of how Mrs. Kaross opens up is in her discussion about Anita Whitney. Obviously she will gladly speak highly of others beside herself. In talking to her once, off tape, she said, "If it was for somebody else I would tear their eyes out. But for me, I would step back and not fight." Perhaps this is the key to the affection with which she is held in her union. She was a fighter for others.

Conduct of the Interview

The Interviewer first saw Mrs. Kaross at a meeting of Union Wage in San Francisco where she shared the stage with a current union organizer of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America speaking on the J.P. Stevens boycott. Kaross spoke on the history of the Textile Workers Union, but did not develop her own experiences.

Our first meeting prior to the interview was at the Russian Bookshop on McAllister Street in San Francisco where a number of older women participate in the running of the shop which is sponsored by the Russian American Institute. She is a splendid youngster of 77 to the more elderly 80 and 90 year old ladies around her. They all look to her for guidance; come to her with questions on running the shop, and play her with sandwiches and tea. You can see here a series of real friendships which have built up through the turbulent years of shared experiences.

She radiates warmth and is a very direct woman whose popularity and extensive travels have not spoiled her in any way. She is completely natural, very likeable. Although the interviewer had never met her before, she was immediately friendly. Her objection to the interview as that she did not want to "boast about herself," which the questions seemed to lead her to do.

Sonia Baltrun Kaross - page three

Her home is comfortably furnished, and includes many mementoes of her travels. She is an artist and finds time to do interesting and clever work with stamps.

She does all her own cooking and housekeeping. Also she takes care of her widowed stepfather. Thus she maintains two homes, doing the cooking and cleaning for both.

Mr. Kaross is a quiet, gentle man who works in the garden, goes hunting and fishing, helps Sonia with the canning, etc. He did not participate in the interview because we wanted Ms. Kaross' experiences as a woman organizer, but he was agreeable and friendly throughout the series, and a gracious host.

Narrative Account of the Interview

Sonia Kaross talks of her childhood in New England, her love for her father and her distress at his early death. Due to his illness she went to work at the age of 12 to help support the family. Immediately after his death she became ill and had to leave home. So at the age of 16 she went to Philadelphia to become a bookkeeper of a Socialist paper.

Immediately she became involved in a series of activities, suffrage, business manager of a women's paper, membership in the Lithuanian Literary Society, etc.

During her tenure at the paper she met her husband to be. After marriage she became pregnant. Her child was miscarried due to her arrest in the 1919 Palmer raids.

She became a founding member of the Communist Party in 1919 after the Socialist party split.

Shortly thereafter the Kaross' moved to a textile town where she went to work in the textile mills. From then on she became active in union organizing, in a strike, in working for the international as a roving organizer. She again became pregnant. The child was ill. This necessitated a move to California.

Then begins the story of her activities during the depression; her street corner speeches; her arrests; her moving from one job to another; and finally her determination to organize the California Cotton Mills. The story of this organization and the consequent strike and development of a union is key to the interview. For this led to what might be considered a life work as a union official.

Also, in 1932 she was sent to the Amsterdam peace conference, which set a precedent for her future activities in behalf of world peace.

The interview develops to cover continuing organizational work, the war years, and finally her difficulties with the International which finally moved her to leave the union.

Sonia Baltrun Kaross - page four

During the course of the interview Mrs. Kaross makes some pertinent observations on the role of women within the trade union movement.

The interviewer finds this an unusual interview because of the almost complete separation from the International the West Coast Union had for many years; and because of the close relationship with her membership which voted her in year after year despite, during the latter years, the concerted attempts of the International to oust her from office.

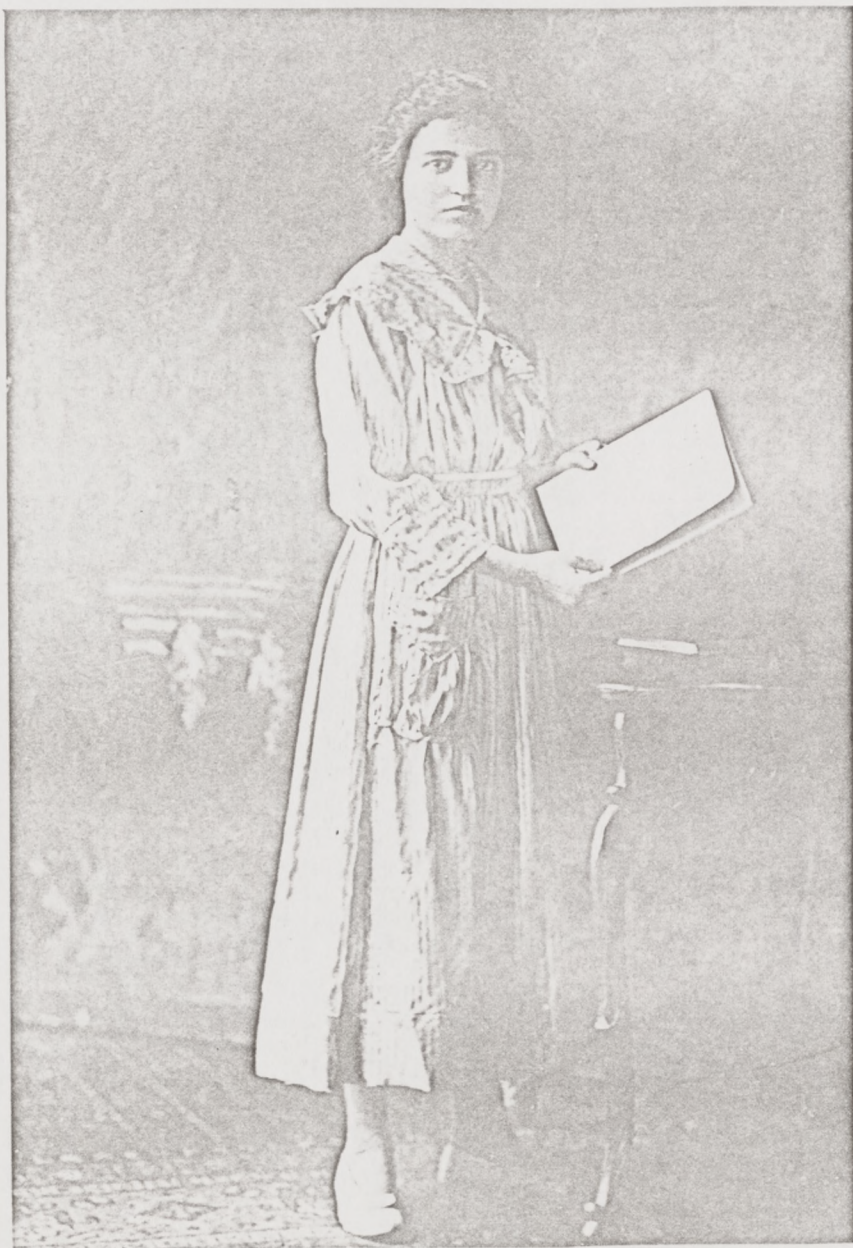
Also the interview presents a picture of a union which was not a basic industry and which represented the unskilled workers, most of whom were women.

The questions were pursued from a feminist point of view, and also in an attempt to find comparisons between varying methods of organization during the decades.

Editing

The only changes made in this verbatim copy of the tape have been made by Mrs. Kaross.

Lucy Kendall
November 1977



Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Taken in Philadelphia, Pa. in 1917 when manager
of Lithuanian Women's Voice. Shown holding copy
of the paper.

In Portrait Collection under Kaross. Neg. No. 22844

Kaross, Sonia Baltrun (right) with
Whitney, Anita (left). Early 1930's.

Under Kaross in Portrait Collection.

Neg. No. 22888





May, 1930.

Left to Right: Dorothy Ray (now Healy), Gertrude
Warwick, Anna ? ("Red" Anna), Sonia Baltrun Kaross.

In Portrait Collection under Kaross.

Neg. No. 22889



Sonia Baltrun Kaross - Dec. 1976

In Portrait Collection under Kaross.



Sonia Baltrun Kaross, pictured with official of
Textile Workers Union of America - May, 1950.

Under Kaross in Portrait Collection.

Neg. No. 22887

COPY of program for International Women's Day Celebration.

Sonia Baltrun was the Chairman.

Date she remembers is probably early 1930's.

PROGRAM

INTERNATIONAL

WOMEN'S

DAY

Entertainment & Dancing

MAIN SPEAKER

ANITA WILKINSON

COMRADES

HALE

1819-10th ST. BEEKER

Sat. May 7th 7:45 P.M.

DANCING AFTER PROGRAM

Admission

15¢

Spaghetti Dinner - 6 p.m. - 25¢

Distributor's Permit No. 284

INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN WOMEN
of the Working Class.

Krupskaya - widow of Lenin, leader in the field of education in the Soviet Union.

Ella Reeve Bloor - veteran leader of many working class struggles in this country.

Fanny Sellins - shot down on the picket line of the Great Steel Strike of 1919.

Mother Jones - devoted her entire life to organizing the Trade Unions of this country.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn - noted for her militant leadership of the Passaic Textile Strike.

Mother Mooney - indefatigable worker for the freedom of her son until her recent death

Ella May Wiggins - working class mother and leader in the Gastonia Textile Strike; composer of strike songs; shot down by hired thugs.

Rosa Luxemburg - militant left leader of the German working class; shot down in cold blood by renegades of the German Revolution.

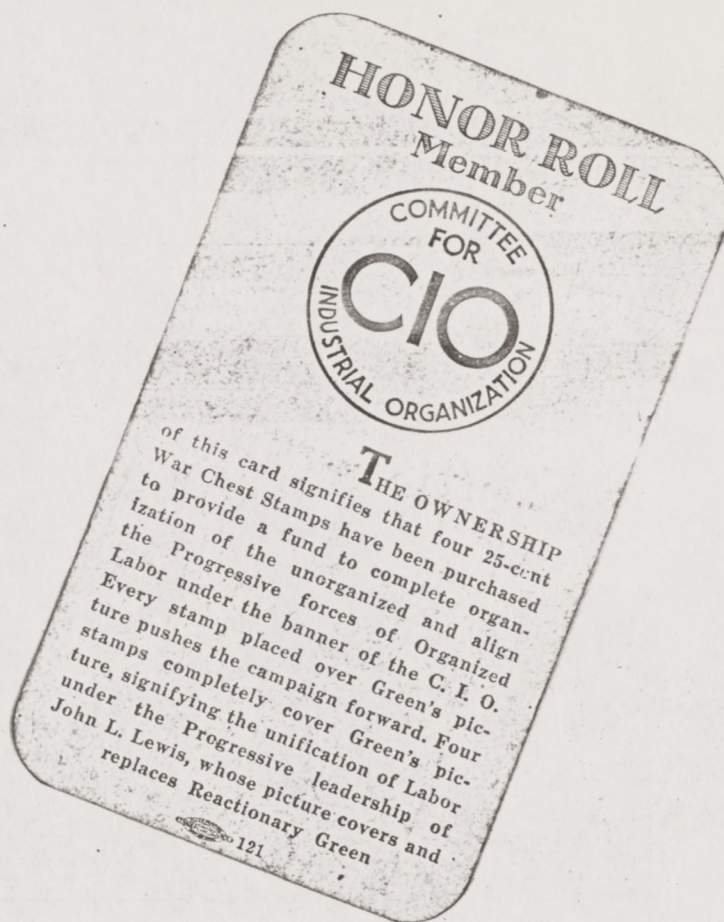
Alexandra Kollantai - leading woman diplomat of the Soviet Union; well known author.

Mrs. Patterson - mother of one of the Scottsboro Boys who has worked incessantly for their freedom.

PROGRAM

1. Radio two selections
2. "Purpose of International Women's Day"
Sonia Baltrun, Chairman
3. Soprano Solo Naine Bergman
accompanist - Viola Suisto
4. "Women in the Soviet Union"
Florence Thompson
Piano Solo Nelly Harju
- "Women Under Fascism" Skit
East Bay Theatre Union
- "Women and War" ANITA WHITNEY
- Coloratura Soprano Solo Dina Cartasso
accompanist - Ada Mitchell
- American Youth Congress speaker
- Accordion Solo Virginia Lakso

DANCING UNTIL MIDNIGHT



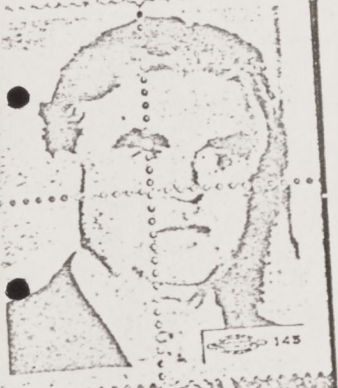
COPY OF CARD OWNED BY SONIA KAROSS.

RAISING MONEY FOR CIO ORGANIZATION. Stamps were purchased to have the picture of John L. Lewis of CIO cover that of William Green of the AFL

HONOR ROLL
Member



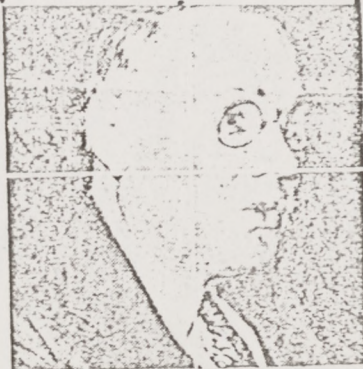
ete Organization of Alameda Co.



HONOR ROLL
Member

W.
CH
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Co.

AR
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ND
Co.



Organizer's Commission
 ISSUED BY
 THE UNITED TEXTILE WORKERS OF AMERICA
 AFFILIATED WITH THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR
 — TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN —
 This Certifies that the Board of Directors of the United Textile Workers of America has
 a resident of the City of Oakland State of California and shall continue in such capacity
 been duly appointed a General Organizer for the United Textile Workers of
 America, for United States and shall continue in such capacity
 until Dec 31 1936 when this Commission shall expire.
Wm. J. Helgerson International President
James J. Carr International Sec.-Treas.
 6736
 This Commission may be revoked at any time for non-compliance with instructions.

Organizer's Commission issued to Sonia Kaross by the
 United Textile Workers of America on June 23, 1936

church's general conference.

liner Champlain.

as a complete answer.

Peoples World - April 29, 1939

Senate Committee Sets Stage For 'Baby Dies' Probe Today

SAN FRANCISCO, April 28.—The California Senate's "Baby Dies Committee" today set the stage for tomorrow's inquisition into activities of the Workers Alliance and organized labor on behalf of jobless citizens, by serving subpoenas on prominent local labor leaders.

Starting "The people of the State of California send greetings," subpoenas were issued for State President Alexander Noral, State Secretary E. M. O'Donnell, State Vice President Roy Noftz, A. F. Potter, executive board member, and Fred Crocker, executive board member, all of the Workers Alliance; President George Wilson and Secretary

Herman Stuyvelaar of the local CIO Industrial Union Council, Sonya Baltrun, Textile Workers Organizing Committee secretary, and others.

The subpoenas commanded appearance before the "Special Senate Committee to investigate the State Chamber of Commerce, All Other Groups and Persons and Economic Conditions," in the examination room in the State Building Basement, Civic Center at 9 a. m., Saturday, April 29.

In Sacramento, it was indicated today that one of the "investigators" of Rep. Martin Dies, the Texas witch-hunter, may sit in with

the California red-baiting committee when it attempts to smear the Workers Alliance and organized labor.

Senator D. Jack Metzger (R., Red Bluff), committee chairman, is considering such action following receipt of a letter from one of the most rabid alien-baiters lobbying at the legislature—Royal C. Stephens, president of "National Club of America for Americans, Inc."

Stephens said his offer to appear gave the committee "the opportunity of a lifetime to expose to the public the un-American activities of that organization calling themselves the Workers Alliance."

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WOMEN HAVE ALWAYS WORKED

Since the days of the covered wagon and long before women have baked bread, prepared the food and sewed the clothes. But as this work was transferred from the home to the factory, we women followed it.

Our working husbands, sons and brothers learned early that to protect themselves they needed unions so that united with their fellow workers, they could demand and keep good working conditions. As we women came into the factories to compete with the workingmen, the men realized that in order to protect themselves and us, they must take us working women into their unions.

IT IS THE DUTY OF ALL WOMEN TO KEEP FAITH WITH OUR MEN!!!

REMEMBER! ! ! That whether you plan to continue working after the war or become a housewife again, it is your duty to protect the working conditions for your husband - son - or brother who will be coming back to take his place in the shops. You must do your part now to build the kind of union which will guarantee you after the War - -

- 1- Protection on your job
- 2- Job security
- 3- Promotional rights based on length of service and seniority rather than favoritism
- 4- A democratic grievance procedure.

OR OUR FIGHTING MEN WILL NOT HAVE ANYTHING TO COME HOME TO!

JOIN TEXTILE WORKERS UNION OF AMERICA,
C.I.O. NOW

of the need of labor political action.
 Board of Labor's Non-Partisan League and has always
 been a sincere trade unionist with a full consciousness

Illinois, Tauscher went to work in the coal mines at
 Herrin, Illinois, under closed shop conditions.
 His mother's brother, Guy Young, became regional direc-

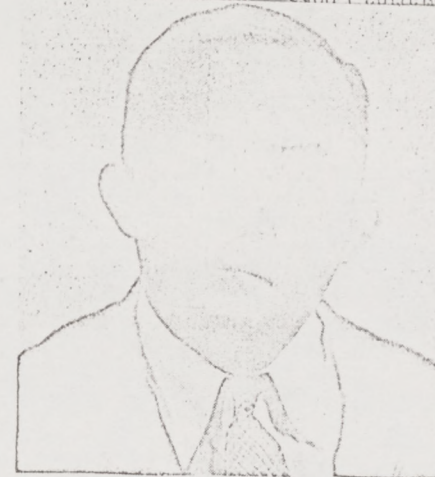
John R. (Jack) O'Donnell joined the mining work-
 and Stewards' Association of the Pacific Coast at the close
 of the World War in 1919. During the past twenty years
 O'Donnell has worked aboard ship in most parts of the
 world, and has seen workers in many lands struggling



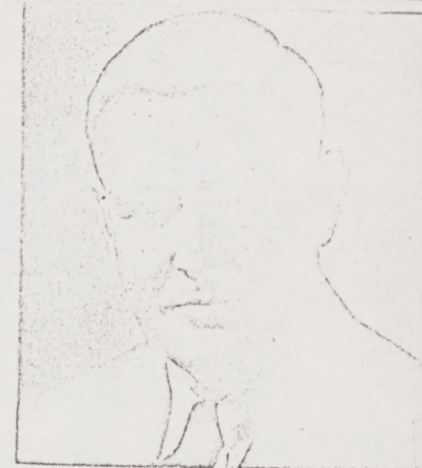
G. L. "RED" ADAMS
 Vice-President



SONIA BALTRUN
 Vice-President



THOMAS G. BROWN
 Vice-President



WILLIAM HANSCOM
 Vice-President

1940 Officers of the CALIFORNIA INDUSTRIAL UNION COUNCIL

At the 1939 Convention of the California Industrial
 Union Council, incumbent President Philip M. Connelly
 and Secretary-Treasurer Louis Goldblatt were reelected,
 together with incumbent Vice-Presidents G. L. "Red"
 Adams, Paul Schlupf, Charles Steele and Estolv E. Ward.

New officers elected at the Convention were Vice-Presi-
 dents Sonia Baltrun, William Hanscom, Ernest Marsh,
 John R. O'Donnell, William J. Plunkert, Noah Tauscher,
 George Woolf and Morris Zusman.

Following are brief biographies of the new officers of
 the State Industrial Union Council:



CHARLES STEELE
 Vice-President



NOAH TAUSCHER
 Vice-President

THOMAS C. BROWN

Thomas C. Brown was born in Wilkes Barre, Pennsyl-
 vania, April 25, 1899, raised in the coal mining and copper
 camps: Wilkes Barre; Butte, Montana; Coeur d'Alene



ES

At the 1939 Convention of the California Industrial Union Council, incumbent President Philip M. Connelly and Secretary-Treasurer Louis Goldblatt were reelected, together with incumbent Vice-Presidents G. L. "Red" Adams, Paul Schlippf, Charles Steele and Estolv E. Ward. New officers elected at the Convention were Vice-Presidents Sonia Baltrun, William Hanscom, Ernest Marsh, John R. O'Donnell, William J. Plunkert, Noah Tauscher, George Woolf and Morris Zusman. Following are brief biographies of the new officers of the State Industrial Union Council:

SONIA BALTRUN

Sonia Baltrun is International Representative of Textile Workers Union of America on the Pacific Coast and Vice-President of San Francisco District Industrial Union Council.

She was raised in the State of Vermont, worked in the textile mills in New England States from an early age. She joined United Textile Workers Union in 1922 and participated in many strikes of that industry in New England.

In those days, true to the A. F. of L. tactics, in many textile mills the only organized groups were the loom fixers, weavers, machinists and other highly skilled workers. They were organized in as many craft unions. No one bothered to organize the bulk of the mill workers, of whom the great majority were women. On many of the jobs, which is true even today in the south and other unorganized mills, where identical work was done by women workers, their pay was from one-third to one-half that of men workers.

Weavers brought in their minor children into the mill, to run off bobbins and to learn weaving. They were not booked in the mills as employees, but worked on parents' cards. When the state inspectors came through they were tipped off and the children were sent home. Those were the conditions. This necessitated some action.

In 1926 the New England's Working Women's Federation was organized, in which Baltrun took active part. She was co-editor of its monthly publication, "Woman Worker." Was elected by the Federation on the Legislative Committee for the State of Massachusetts. This organization sponsored many bills for the benefit of working mothers, against child labor and for labor in general.

She came to California in 1929. She helped to organize California Cotton Mills and led a successful four-month strike. In 1936 during general organizing campaign conducted by the Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, contacts were made by that union in the bag industry. Baltrun organized the complete industry in Northern California and led a successful strike in San Francisco, which made considerable gains for the workers in the industry. She organized Cordage and Curtain Industries as well as other miscellaneous textiles, and the largest knitting mill in California, Gantner and Mattern. During the 1934 Longshoremen's strike, Sonia Baltrun organized the first Longshoremen's Women's Auxiliary in Oakland and was the first president of that group. At the present time she is directing an extensive organizational campaign in the largest Pacific Coast textile center, Los Angeles.

CHAR
"Vice"

THOMAS C. BROWN

Thomas C. Brown was born in Vania, April 25, 1899, raised in camps: Wilkes-Barre; E. District, Idaho.

On graduating from school around Coeur d'Alene District, British Columbia; Clarkston, Idaho; finally Kellogg, Washington; in 1918 and went to Marine Firemen, Oilers, Wash. Washington. He went sail oiler, watertender, pump East and West Coast.

Brown went through the ports of Mobile, Pensacola one season on the Great L coast, November, 1924. He Pedro at that time.

Tom Brown worked continuously since 1924 as d and extra ship foreman. U I. L. A. in 1933, became active in both strikes, serv mittee. He was elected I. L. W. U. October 8, 19 capacity since that time.

WILLIAM

Born in Machias, Maine first twenty years of his he migrated to the Pacific years in Coos Bay, Oregon time, in the San Francisco

His industrial experience in Maine, telegraph operation metal mills of Connecticut oil refinery in Contra Costa sixteen years he has worked industrial problems and the changing industrial age led trial knowledge by studying the University of California ing his position on the job

Participation in organizing chiefly to the past half dozen International Union c 1934 under the American H active in the activities of h were suspended from the from the beginning of the Industrial Organization in A delegate to the Con he served on the first Exec in 1938 was elected vice-p during the latter part of th

From Proceedings - Second Annual State (Cal)
Convention 1939

TEXTILE WORKERS UNION OF AMERICA

AFFILIATE OF THE CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

15 UNION SQUARE

NEW YORK 3, N. Y.

ALGONQUIN 4-7885

OFFICE OF THE
GENERAL SEC'Y-TREASURER

February 23, 1945.

Mrs. Sonia Baltrum
T. W. U. A.
150 Golden Gate Ave.,
San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Sister Baltrum:

I have just received a letter dated February 16th with clipping concerning your election as Queen of the C.I.O. Blood Donors after you had given your eighteenth pint. May I say to you that we at the National Office are deeply grateful to you - first for the splendid contribution you are making to the war effort in saving the lives of our members of the armed forces who may be wounded in battle, and second for the splendid public relations job you are doing for the good name of the organization you represent. Congratulations!

Faternally yours,

Wm. Pollock
William Pollock
General Secretary-Treasurer

Rose voluntarily make the following statement:
 I live at 2701-618 St. Oakland (Te 3-7726)
 I am employed as a tourist operator at National
 Carpeting and am financial secretary of Textile Workers
 Union Local 1378. I was notified to go to Mr. Swanson's office by Superintendent
 Brown. I went together with Frank Costa, shop chairman.
 When we got to Mr. Swanson's office the following were
 present, Mrs. Baltrun, our business agent (Bob Crum),
 Mr. Swanson. I am not sure of Mr. Myers, production
 manager was there when I arrived or not. I know
 he was there later. Also Basil Scott arrived later.
 Right after I got there Mr. Swanson said he was
 leaving Bob Crum and Ted Myers go. He said
 he was leaving Bob go because he was dissatisfied
 with his work. Mrs. Baltrun asked Mr. Swanson
 not to leave him go until we talked it over
 and got things straightened out. Mr. Swanson
 made out. Bob

I know this because later I was handed one. Mr. Severson said to Bob: "We have a Contract signed with you people CIO!" Mrs. Baltrum then asked the Company people to step out so we could use the office to talk. They (the Company) representatives left and Mrs. Baltrum, myself, Frank Costa & Scott met with Bob. Then Mrs. Baltrum asked Bob if he passed any AFL Card and he said just one but she had asked for it back. We asked for details about who gave him the Cards. All that we talked about with Bob was the AFL Cards. We did not talk about his work at all or his job. After this I went back to my job I did not see Mr. Severson again. Mr. Weinberg was at the meeting with Bob, during the time that both Company and Union representatives were present. He came in later. I cannot remember anything he said. Mr. Myers did not say anything that I recall. I have carefully read the above Affidavit which consists of this page and 2 others. I have voluntarily given this statement to an Agent of N. S. R. B. I swear this statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Subscribed & sworn to before me
this 17th day of Oct 1955 at Oakland

15/ Natalie Allen

N. S. R. B. Examiner

15/ Rose Volante

See Page 293 of transcript
for story of these two letters and
two telegrams

April 1, 1960

Mr. Neil Griffin
811 Weatherly Building
Portland, Oregon

Dear Neil:

I thought I had better notify you that I received a notice from the National Labor Relations Board, dated March 24, 1960, of charges filed against the Company by Sonia Baltrun for allegedly refusing to bargain in good faith. The charge reads, in part:

"Via acts and conduct by the employer, we have interfered with, restricted, and coerced the employees".

I suppose you are well aware of the fact that I terminated negotiations on or about the 18th of March because the Alameda Central Labor Council interceded and I refused to meet with them. For my part, we have had enough of the Central Labor Council. Last year they attempted to strike the people in the Carpet Plant even before negotiations were concluded or terminated.

Neil, might I ask what is wrong with T.W.U.A. that you don't have a staff that feels confident enough to conduct negotiations with the companies that they have contracts with? For your information, and all others concerned, I am not going to meet in negotiations as long as any representatives from Central Labor Council are there. I am very provoked about Sonia filing charges against the Company before the Board, for I feel that we have always been able to reach a just and amiable conclusion of negotiations without such actions on either part in the past.

I would appreciate an answer from you at your earliest convenience in relation to this attitude of your Bay Area representative. As you know, I informed Sonia that I was ready and willing to meet with her at any time she so desired to meet, without the Central Labor Council present.

Respectfully yours,

NAFI Corporation

Ned A. Warner
Industrial Relations

NAW/nj

cc: Mr. William Pollock
Mr. George Lindner
Miss Sonia Baltrun

TEXTILE WORKERS UNION OF AMERICA

Affiliate of the AFL-CIO and CLC

99 UNIVERSITY PLACE

NEW YORK 3, N. Y.

ORegon 3-1400

OFFICE OF THE
GENERAL PRESIDENT

March 30, 1960

Mr. Robert S. Ash
Central Labor Council of Alameda County
AFL-CIO
Labor Temple
2315 Veldez Street
Oakland, California

Dear Brother Ash:

Last year in May our Local #146 was in negotiation with the Burkhart Manufacturing Company of Oakland for a new contract. Mr. Gruille, a representative of your council, entered these negotiations without your council contacting our West Coast Director or my office to check whether or not it was alright to do so. It did not help that situation and it was a source of complete embarrassment to us. When my office learned about it, I sent in one of our staff representatives, Morris Riger, who successfully negotiated a good settlement of the strike and the contract.

Our Local #1378 is now in negotiations with the NAFI Corporation for a new contract and I now learn your council representative is again in the picture.

I want him withdrawn immediately. When our union needs your help we will formally request it either through our West Cost Director or my office.

I am sending a copy of this letter to President Meany to let him know we are quite disturbed by your council's apparent effort to take over the function of our International Union.

Fraternally yours,

William Pollock
William Pollock
General President

CLASS OF SERVICE

This is a fast message unless its deferred character is indicated by the proper symbol.

WESTERN UNION

TELEGRAM

W. P. MARSHALL, PRESIDENT

The filing time shown in the date line on domestic telegrams is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

SYMBOLS

DL=Day Letter

NL=Night Letter

 28r=PM International
 3r=PM Telegram

OA187 PRD296

PR LLH146 PD=PORTLAND ORG 28 230PMP=

:SONIA BALTRUN=

BAY AREA JOINT BOARD 693 MISSION ST SFRAN=

I HAVE BEEN INFORMED BY NAFL REPRESENTATIVE THAT GAROO OF THE ALAMEDA CENTRAL LABOR COUNCIL PARTICIPATED IN NEGOTIATIONS I CONTACTED PRESIDENT POLLOCK REGARDING THE MATTER IT IS MY EXPRESSED WISH AND THAT OF PRESIDENT POLLOCK THAT THE COUNCIL NOT PARTICIPATE NEGOTIATIONS IF ASSISTANCE IS NEEDED PLEASE BE REMINDED THAT AS WEST COAST DIRECTOR I AM AVAILABLE AND IF A FURTHER ASSISTANCE IS NEEDED THE INTERNATIONAL UNION WILL SUPPLY THAT ALSO=

NEIL GRIFFIN WEST COAST DIRECTOR TEXTILE WORKERS

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING IT

UNION. S.S.

CLASS OF SERVICE

This is a fast message unless its deferred character is indicated by the proper symbol.

WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

W. P. MARSHALL, PRESIDENT

SYMBOLS

DL=Day Letter

NL=Night Letter

LT=International Letter Telegram

1201

The filing time shown in the date line on domestic telegrams is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination.

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B SFA018 PD=SF NEW YORK NY 1 1058AME=

MRS SONIA BALTRUN BAY AREA JOINT BOARD=

TWUA AFL CIO ICLC 693 MISSION ST ROOM 201 SFRAN=

CENTRAL LABOR COUNCIL PARTICIPATION IN BURKHART NEGOTIATION
LAST JUNE WAS HARMFUL TO YOUR MEMBERS. TWUA HAS COMPETENT
STAFF. WE ALWAYS DO OUR OWN NEGOTIATING. THIS IS UNION
POLICY. NO REQUEST HERE FROM COMPANY ON THIS MATTER. PLEASE
COMPLY=

WILLIAM POLLOCK GENERAL, PRESIDENT TWUA AFL-CIO CLC 99
UNIVERSITY PLACE NEW YORK CITY.

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

We, negotiating Committee of
Local 1378 and 146 in N.A.Z.D.,
read Griffin and your telegrams
regarding withdrawing Central
Labor Council assistance at
Company's request in negotiation
and are dissatisfied.

Locals voted to ask their
assistance. This is a general
practice in Alameda County
with all Unions.

We do not wish to go
against Int. policy, but
do not feel the Company
should ~~be~~ say whom
we should have in nego-
tiations.

We ask permission and
approval to go on as we
started. Please answer
immediately.

Georgia McNeal - Gen. Sec.
10663 Empire Rd.
Berkeley 5, Calif.
Committee: George Frazier
Frank Costa Joe Romo
Mary Fernandez
Sus. D. Billy

NATIONAL COMMITTEE AGAINST NAZI CRIMINALS AND NAZISM IN AMERICA

620

SECRETARY:

(Mrs.) SYLVIA SCHWARTZ

CHAIRMAN:

RABBI S. BURR YAMPOL

6159 NORTH KENMORE AVE.

CHICAGO 40, ILL.

Telephone: RO. 1-9050

January 16, 1964

Mrs. Sonia B. Kaross
577 Kenilworth Avenue
San Leandro, California

Dear Mrs. Kaross:

No doubt you know by now that General Adolph Heusinger has been relieved of his post, as of March 1, 1964, and we are glad to announce that Lt. General Baron C. P. de Cumont of Belgium will succeed him as Chairman of the Nato Military Committee.

We also wish to tell you that Stasys Zakevicius, a war criminal, who lived in Los Angeles, under the name of Szymantas, has died. He was fifty-four years old. Also, Guozas Ambrazevicius, one of the most important war criminals of Lithuania, died in New York, recently. So, we have three less on our list, but there are more left.

In your vicinity, there is J. ARNOLD ESTONS, who lives in San Francisco. You will have to find his address. You will find his name on page 29 in the herewith enclosed booklet. We suggest that you organize a committee immediately that would follow through with the following suggestions: Write to your Congressmen and Senators, asking that they request Commissioner Raymond F. Farrell, of Immigration and Naturalization Services, 119 D Street, Washington 25, D. C. 20536, to make an immediate investigation about the illegal entrance of J. Arnold Estons. He was a Nazi Collaborator in Latvia and came in on falsified papers. If our claims are substantiated, then he should be extradited to his native land to stand trial for his murderous acts.

We also request that your committee visit your Congressmen and Senators on their week-end visits to their homes and ascertain from them if they have complied with your requests and, if not, persuade them to do so immediately, and thus help cleanse our land of these arch criminals who stalk our cities.

You may inform them that Congressman Frank Kowalski said, "Many Fascist Genocides have bought their way into the United States." Congressman Seymour Halpern of New York, said, "Some of the leading culprits remain unpunished, enjoying life in Spain, in Latin America and in the United States itself." Congressmen John F. Shelley, (Calif.), Alvin O'Konski, (Wisc.), Emmanuel S. Celler, (N.Y.), Victor L. Anfuso, (N.Y.), William Fitts Ryan, (N.Y.), and others have demanded a full scale investigation by the United States Attorney General.

Have your Senators and Congressmen join this list of upright men!

Hoping to hear of your plans and activities at an early date, we are,

Sincerely yours,

NATIONAL COMMITTEE AGAINST NAZI CRIMINALS
AND NAZISM

With best regards.

S. Burr Yampol

To the Eighth World Conference Against A & H Bombs
American Labor Unions.

by Sonia Kaross

It is to be regretted that the U.S. Labor Unions did not deem it necessary to send an official delegate and or an observer to the 8th Japanese Conference Against A & H Bombs, thus making this delegation fully broad based as to the social, economic and political background, which could be united on a common platform of world peace.

The few unions, as the ILWU, needle trades, auto and others, have seriously discussed and created committees to work for peace. The anxiety for peace is mounting, even as the U.S. armament expenditure is increasing. This is putting heavier burden on the shoulders of the working people. By far the greatest amount of National income in the U.S. is spent on war preparations.

We in the U.S. have not suffered the horrors of war. We have not seen the bombs dropping, which devastates life and property. Therefore the reactionaries have been able to lull and stall the labor's peace movement.

The work of the Trade Unions for peace should be a major importance. The question of reconversion is the primary question for U.S. labor.

Creation of economic committee to work towards reconversion of war economy to peace economy is a dire necessity.

Today, even as the nation's economy is fully geared and bolstered to the armaments race, it is a known fact that there is almost 5 million unemployed workers in the United States.

Higher standards of living is possible with the diversion of war economy to peace economy. It is only necessary for us to study the reports and analysis made by the United Nations economists, to refute the lies that an economic chaos will follow disarmament.

It would be the duty of Economic Committee to immediately take preparatory steps to plan our peace economy.

How unprepared we are today, can be shown by a vivid example, when Women For Peace confronted the governor of California early last spring. He was asked what is being done in planning reconversion in case of disarmament, as California economy is 2/3 war economy. He said that so far not a thing was done, he will think about it. However, he stated that some million of dollars was being considered for fall-out shelters. It is an example of lack of sound planning, which should be promptly corrected.

Ending of arms race and the development of industries geared to civilian production would, if anything, increase employment. Many products of substantial durability developed for war potential could be manufactured for peaceful uses.

By the abolishing of heavy income taxes on labor, would raise the standard of living of main segment of population-the working people and thus create markets for domestic consumption of durable goods and this would create more jobs.

There is also this fact to be seriously considered. The economically underdeveloped countries, which have just liberated themselves could pick up the slack. These countries if permitted to receive aid without conditions attached to this aid, would provide market not for war potential but for raising their economic levels.

Since close to fifty percent of world's population lives under underdeveloped economy the aid from economically developed countries, would raise the standard of living for the entire population in this world.

Therefore the only reliable basis for easing of the tensions and solving peace problem would be a total disarmament.

The U.S. Unions must become a movement to consolidate the country's economy in that understanding, that it would strengthen the position of peace. The anxiety for peace is mounting everywhere and that is accompanied by the growth of forces which will eventually curb war mongers.

If we are to make "Our beautiful planet", as the Soviet Union and our cosmonauts have described our earth, safe from holocaust of nuclear war, all segments of our world population must take part in the peace movement.

All delegates having trade union connections, should bring the thoughts and resolves of this conference to the knowledge of the workers in their unions, in order to build an invincible core of peace. We must call for an incessant and continuous actions for peace, but not for intermitted activities only. Only then there will be NO MORE HIROSHIMAS.

12-12-74
SONIA;

You will be surprised to get this card and message I received from the Presidency of the Textile Workers Union of American at the 1972 convention when I would not run for re-election. With Warren Lib and all the rest I was thinking about you as one of the first woman officials in the Trade Union movement and how you so competently administered the work of our union in the Bay Area before you retired.

I'm also reminded of my visit to you home with my wife and our youngest son Kenneth who was then 4 years old. He is now 30 and was married Feb. 1973. He is in the police department of Ocean City, N.J. and well on his way to move ahead. Bill the oldest boy has 4 daughters - the oldest 20. He works for the government and doing quite well. Ken still remembers Ma Baltman's gun rack with the 22 calibre gun among your Soviet friends. Ma Baltman let Ken hold the small one and promise to take him hunting when he got old enough. We remember the beautiful arches you raised and the fine wild duck meat - a duck you had brought back from your hunting trip.

This is all so long ago. So much has happened since. SONIA I will probably never get back to the West Coast to see you again. I hope this note finds you in good health. I pray 1975 will be one of your best years.

Good Luck

Wm Pollock

Letter in Christmas card sent to Sonia Kaross by
Wm. Pollock, retired official of the Textile
Workers Union. Date December, 1974

Have a sparkling Christmas!
And a wonderful New Year!

OK
SKB
Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross
Date of Interview - Saturday, July 23, 1977
Home of Ms. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall
Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin: Tape 1 - page one - Counter #1

Ken:

This is Saturday, July 23rd, 1977, and this will be the first in a series of interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross for the California Historical Society, Women in California Collection. The interviews are being held in Mrs. Kaross' home in San Leandro, California. FAMILY

Ken: Sonia, the first thing we are going to ask you is about your family history. What do you remember about your grandparents?

Kar: I don't remember at all.

Ken: On either side?

Kar: On either side. They stayed in Lithuania, and I was too young to know them at that time, and when they were dead, I don't remember which ones. I don't remember at all.

Ken: Where was your mother born?

Kar: Lithuania.

Ken: Where was your father born?

Kar: Lithuania.

Ken: Did they ever tell you how they met?

Kar: No.

Ken: What kind of a marriage did they have?

Kar: They had a strange marriage. My father did not go to church. He was about to be - rather went to school to be a priest. His parents wanted him to be a priest. And just before he was ordained he quit and he joined the revolutionary movement.

Ken: What was so strange about that?

Kar: Well, my mother remained a Catholic - a very devout Catholic, and she taught us children religion. Father did not interfere.

Ken: What kind of a person was your father?

Kar: He was very kind, and he loved me more, I think, than he did my brothers. I used to run with all kinds of

Kar: troubles to him. He was very kind.

Ken: How did he make a living after he quit the church?

Kar: He made a living by writing letters for people because there were very few people that could write in Lithuania. He used to write letters for them to their sons who were away at that time. And he wrote all kinds of documents and he worked as a county clerk in Lithuania.

Ken: How would you describe your mother?

Kar: My mother was just like any farm woman. She came from a farm family and she was a good housekeeper. And that is about all I can tell you about her.

Ken: Did she work?

Kar: She worked at home.

Ken: What kind of work?

Kar: Housework in Lithuania. When she came here she had a very tough time in the United States.

Ken: What kind of an education did she have?

Kar: She used to read and write, and that's all. And that was taught by her mother. You know in the old country they were weaving their own clothes. And when her mother was weaving clothes, children had to sit by her and study from the prayer book and learn how to read. And that's how they learned to read and also to write.

Ken: What about your mother's attitude toward your father, about your going to your father with your problems instead of to her?

Kar: I didn't hear very much about it. But I know they got along well. She didn't interfere with what he was doing, and he didn't interfere with her religion. And he wrote some books. In fact in Lithuanian at that time there were so few people that could read and write or know history that my father wrote books. And those books are now, by the way, in a museum in Lithuania. And his handwriting was just beautiful. He wrote history of the world, and used to read to the people there. He translated from Russian books. And the people used to gather at our home and my father used to read from those books to them.

Ken: Do you know why he joined the revolutionary movement?

Kar: He joined in about 1904 - before that probably, but I don't know. I don't know for sure?

Ken: Were you pretty well to do in Lithuania?

Kar: Well, he was not well to do, but he was better off than his brothers and sisters because they worked on a farm. And they had chosen him from a large family (I think there were seven children), because he was smarter, to be a priest. Naturally he had to have a better dish to eat. They petted him more, and they saved the money to send him off to teach him. So he didn't suffer hardship as much as his brothers and sisters from being on a farm.

Ken: After he and your mother married and your children were born was he able to make a living?

Kar: He was able to make a good living. The people there used to - instead of paying cash money of which they had very little - they used to bring all kinds of food if he wrote a letter for them. And then he had also this job at the county. He was the county secretary or something. I am not sure. But anyway he got paid for that. So we lived pretty well while we were there.

Ken: How did his activities affect the family?

Kar: They affected to the extent that in 1905 uprising, he was one of those, and they were going to send him to Siberia, and he skipped and came to this country. He had to skip. Otherwise he would have been sent to Siberia. CHILDHOOD

Ken: What do you remember about being told when you were born? Did the family ever talk about your birth?

Kar: No. Not that I know of.

Ken: Were you born at home?

Kar: Yes. Everybody was there, born at home.

Ken: How old were your parents when you were born?

Kar: It's hard to tell. I could be figuring back.

Ken: Oh, well, it's not that important. Now you have two brothers?

Kar: I had two brothers.

Ken: When you were five, how old were they?

Kar: My little brother was eleven months, and my brother next to me was two and a half.

Ken: I want to ask you just one more question about Lithuania. Do you remember anything about your first years there?

Kar: I only remember when the Russian gendarmes came to the house (and I can picture the house even today) and they went around looking for my father by sticking their sabres under the beds and in the beds, and ripping beds, and taking the ~~grips~~ ^{books} from the selves. And my mother was crying, and my brothers were screaming, and I was just angry. I remember that. And that's true.

Ken: And they didn't find anything.

Kar: My father had already gone.

Ken: He had left for America first?

Kar: He knew that they were going to come for him. He left. He didn't exactly go to America first. He went to Germany. He knew the German language. He was there awhile, and from Germany he went to America.

Ken: Do you remember how the family fared while he was gone?

Kar: Well, mother got along because they had had some savings. And they got along pretty well. And she started saving what she had because she figured she was going to go to America. And a year later, not quite a year, but within a year she left Lithuania and came to America.

Ken: How did she get the money to come to America?

Kar: She had enough from what they had saved.

Ken: How did you get here?

Kar: By a boat. [laughter].

Ken: Do you remember any experiences on the boat?

Kar: I just remember that everybody was sick.

Ken: Did you go first class or steerage?

Kar: Steerage, naturally, and I remember people being sick and the ship swaying, and that's about all I can remember.

Ken: Did your father meet the ship?

Kar: Yes. In New York Harbor.

Ken: And where did your family go from there?

Kar: Well, my father, when he came to America got a job in Boston with a Lithuanian newspaper.

Ken: Left wing?

Kar: Left wing. And when he sent for my mother he decided that Boston would be a very bad city for the children. We had come from a small town. So he was promised a job in New York somewhere, so he quit, and went there and stayed until mother came. And then when mother did come that job didn't peter out. So finally he had to go to a small town, White Plains, New York, and took another job as an ice carrier. Since my father never worked physically in his life that job was too heavy for him and he was ill. So from then on I remember we kept moving from place to place. He would start working somewhere and he would get sick. Then he would work a little bit somewhere else and he would get sick. And finally we were in Philadelphia, in Amsterdam, New York, in various places, and finally we landed in Vermont, in East ^{Arlington} Hampton, Vermont, at the chair factory.

Ken: Was there a Lithuanian culture there?

Kar; Very little. There was a group of Lithuanians there, but there was very little culture before my father had his meetings there with them and read from the books to them.

Ken: How old were you when you ended up in East ^{Arlington} Hampton?

Kar; I must have been about eleven. I had graduated from grammar school ^{there}.

Ken: What was your home like in East ^{Arlington} Hampton?

Kar: It was a barnlike home, and my mother at that time kept boarders. Besides my father working, she kept boarders and they decided to buy the place. And they put down, I don't know how much, very little, because the whole place was nine hundred dollars, the home and there must have been about an acre and a half of land. Then my father got sick again and I just graduated. I was thirteen, not quite thirteen.

Kar: I graduated in the fall and my birthday is in May.
So I got a job in a factory.

Ken: We are going ahead too fast. I want to find out more
about your young life.

I am thinking about your mother, moving from place
to place, what were the houses like you lived in?

Kar: They were rented houses. They had pieces of furniture,
just enough for us to sleep on, and that's about all.

Ken: Were they plain?

Kar: Well, you can imagine what the poor people had. Some
~~was~~ were clean, others were not.

Ken: How was she able to keep the family together?

Kar: She did the best she could. She was very industrious
and she could make over things. She kept boarders.
She kept boarders right along. You know in those
days they were mostly men running away from the Czar's
service. So those were the people who were living at
my mother's house, mainly. She washed their clothes,
and got so much a month. I don't remember, but very
little.

Ken: This augmented your father's income then?

Kar: He hardly ever worked. He was sick a lot, so we
had to live off my mother, what she made from those
boarders. When those boarders got tired of eating
and would say "throw it away" my mother would make
it over for us.

Ken: How many rooms did your family have in East ^{Arlington} Hampton?

Kar: The house had five rooms, but we had a big barn, and
that's where my mother would put up beds for the
boarders.

Ken: What about bathing facilities?

Kar: We had a tub. We would bathe in the tub, one after
the other.

Ken: Did you have separate bedrooms, you children?

Kar: I had. I had a little closet, and my brothers had
a bedroom together, and my mother and father had
a room.

Ken: What about your religious training then?

Kar: My mother was so religious. She made us go to church
and go to confession.

Ken: What about your father's attitude towards church?

Kar: My father did not interfere with what my mother was teaching. I guess that must have been their agreement that he wasn't going to interfere with what she did with the children as long as she didn't say anything as to how he conducted himself. But I used to go and ask him questions when my mother wasn't around. At a very young age I was very doubtful about her religious teachings.

Ken: What about the language problem? Your parents, did they have a problem?

Kar: That's why probably I got the way I got. I was able to go and meet the people because as soon as I learned English I was pushed into going as an interpreter. When anybody was ill, I had to go to the doctor with them. When they had trouble with the courts, I had to go to court- not understanding the workings, but enough to explain. That's what I had to do.

Ken: Was this for your family or for -

Kar: For the whole Lithuanian community.

Ken: Wherever you went?

Kar: That's right. They all knew I knew English to tell the judge, or to tell the court, or whatever was necessary, or the doctor.

Ken: Well, what about the Lithuanian culture. ^whow ^{ere}were they able to continue that?

Kar: Well, naturally, like most Europeans, we were people that liked to dance, liked to sing. And Lithuanians here immediately organized a chorus for singing, and they organized groups to act in plays. From a very young age I was in all kinds of plays.

Ken: Did you have any relatives here? Did any of your relatives show up?

Kar: There were very few. My mother's sister came here later after my mother was already in the country. She married and had a daughter. We had no other relatives.

Ken: Did you make any friends outside of the Lithuanian community?

Kar: Yes, I did. When I graduated grammar school, the womens'

Kar: societies in that town wanted to send me to high school. There was no high school in that town. So they got together, they got books, and they were going to pay my fare, and all this, if I would only go to high school because I graduated with high honors from grammar school. And at that time my father was ill and I couldn't make it. So finally my father had to make some kind of a document, my birth certificate, that I was fourteen, and I started working. I wasn't quite thirteen.

Ken: What were your father's politics in this country?

Kar: He was what you would call a radical.

Ken: Did he join the Socialist party?

Kar: No. He never had a chance to join in the small towns that we lived in. So he never joined.

Ken: Did they have political discussions in your home?

Kar: My father was always calling groups together and teaching them, talking to them. He was more or less an astronomer. He liked astronomy, the sky and the earth, and so on. That was his hobby.

Ken: Did you have books in your home?

Kar: Oh yes. We had a lot of books. We had all kinds of books that he would read. He could read Russian and would read Russian books because Lithuania didn't have that many. The Lithuanians only got the right to have their books written in Lithuanian in 1904. Before that if the Czar's gendarmes would catch them reading they were arrested. And those books were usually published in Germany and kept secretely, until 1904 when they got their right.

Ken: Did your father and mother learn English finally?

Kar: My father never did. My mother learned enough to get by. Except when she came here to California the people surrounding her were always Lithuanians.

Ken: Did your mother have any interests outside of the family?

Kar: Not very much, no. My mother was just a housewife. She did crocheting, and she did very beautiful things.

Ken: How did your father feel about woman suffrage, do you remember?

Kar: He was all for it. In fact he wrote a book on it. It was never published because he passed away before he completed it. I still have his handwritten books. Of course it is, what would you call it now, ^{outdated} it should be changed.

Ken: Out of date, you mean?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: What kind of a relationship did you have with your father while you were growing up?

Kar: I had a very good relationship. He used to take me out for walks, and if I asked him questions he would always answer. He wouldn't pass it. Like my mother would say, "You will learn when you grow up." My father would never say that. He used to tell me what he knew. And I used to ask him about religion. I would ask him about astronomy, and he would always answer. I loved him very much and when he passed away in 1915 I couldn't stay there at home any more. The doctor even suggested to my mother that I go somewhere else because I had the remembrance of my father so much that I just couldn't stand it. So finally I went to Philadelphia.

Ken: Most parents instill in their children some values. Did your father instill in you any particular values?

Kar: I would say my father was very gentle and very understanding. He used to tell me that I should cultivate understanding people and evaluate their thinking no matter what. And if you feel that they are wrong there is always a way to explain to them without getting angry, and maybe that was one reason why I was able to stay in the union so long [laughter]

Ken: What about politics. Did you ever discuss politics with him?

Kar: Somehow or other I got his point of view and believed in it. And I think it guided my life from there on.

Ken: He was a radical in Lithuania. He came over here and was a radical. How did he feel about the capitalists over here as opposed to the situation in Lithuania?

Ken: I am trying to figure out, if you are a radical and come to another country, do you expect something more of that country. Do you know what his expectations were?

Kar: He expected that ^{the older people (he wasn't that old)} people would be taken care of. Like in the United States nobody would suffer or be starving and he was very much disappointed. That he told me. We were starving practically, and he said "This is America, it has lot of money, and why can't they take care of these people?" You know in those days we didn't have welfare. They had these societies that used to gather old clothes and give them to the poor. And we got some of those clothes. But that wasn't enough. At times we were really hard up.

One of my brothers was pretty ill and we couldn't get a doctor. My mother went to work finally in the town of Troy, New York. She went to work there, and during the day (my brother was only four years old) so either my older brother or I would stay with him during the day. Then the truant officer came after us. The officer told my mother we must go to school, little brother or no little brother we must go to school. And if there is no one to take care of that baby they were going to place him somewhere. Because my father was in the hospital at that time and my mother had to work. So finally, what did we do, we said we will get somebody. So we went to school. We locked my little brother up, and the reason we had to lock him was because he might go out in the street and get hurt. And then at home, you know in those days they had these coal stoves, he even put coal in the stove, and he stayed all day, and we would come home and find him sleeping under the bed or somewhere. For about a year and a half my little brother had to stay like that because we had no other way of keeping him. Just think what my mother felt going to work and not knowing what - whether there might be a fire in the house or something.

Kar: When I think of it it makes me feel awful bad.

End of first side

Start of second side

Counter #1

Ken: I hope these questions don't upset you too much.

Kar: They do because I get very emotional. By nature I am very emotional. I used to get that way wherever I worked too.

Ken: What was the reaction of people, when you got emotional?

Kar: I guess they forgave me [laughter].

Ken: You said your mother and father always got along pretty well. Did they ever have disagreements?

Kar: Not that I know of. I never heard them. If they did, they had to figure out how to hide it from us children.

Ken: I was going to ask you, when your mother was out of the house working during this period, what was she doing?

Kar: She worked in a shirt factory ironing shirts. That was in Troy, New York. Then, later, that I spoke of - my brother being left alone - I asked to go down with some of the girls to get hog hair and the wooden back of the brush and we took that for home work. So the hog hair went into the brush [showed me with her hands how to insert the hair into the brush]. It was hard work, very hard work because we had to pull the hair through. I must have been about ten years, ten and a half, or eleven. I used to have sore fingers from the wire. However I was very glad because I made about seventy five cents a week and that was good money.

Ken: How many hours did you spend to make seventy five cents a week?

Kar: I stayed two or three hours sometimes [a day] and sometimes maybe an hour and a half of an evening. I worked every evening for five days. We had to bring it back on Friday to the factory and get our money.

Ken: Did the school know you were doing this?

Kar: No. Quite a few children were doing that?

Ken: How did your father feel about this?

Kar: He didn't even know, until my mother told him later, that I was making money.

Ken: How did your mother feel?

Kar: My mother felt bad, but she couldn't help it. She finally saved enough to buy me a good pair of shoes for winter.

Ken: As the only girl in the household, how was your relationship with your brothers handled?

Kar: We were a very close family. Very good. At times when we were living there they would find something that they could do and ~~and~~ that I could help them, we would all go together. In fact we went to pick coal for winter time. Both of my brothers (little as the little one was) and I, we got a wagon from ~~some~~ somewhere and we used to go to the railroads and get coal that would fall off the rail cars for burning for winter. We did that for several winters.

Ken: Did your parents ever tell you what you couldn't do or shouldn't do?

Kar: Naturally they told us never to steal, never to lie. We used to see children stealing something, and it just upset us because we couldn't take it. We were not supposed to. If somebody gave me something that she mistrusted she would say, "Are you sure they gave it to you?" Prove it that the party did give me something. I wasn't supposed to take anything. She was afraid maybe we would be stealing since we didn't have much.

Ken: What were you encouraged to do. Did they encourage you to do anything particularly?

Kar: To be truthful, to be honest in everything we do. They encouraged us to study. Even my mother as much as she didn't get along with my father on the religious question told us to study as much as we can so we can get better jobs.

Ken: What was the industry like in Vermont, in Easthampton?

Kar: ~~There was only~~ ^{Arlington} ~~sec~~

Kar: There was only one factory. That was the chair factory where they made chairs.

Ken: Was it a big one.

Kar: It was quite a good sized factory and had about five hundred workers I believe. They were making all kinds of rockers and heavy wooden chairs.

Ken: How big was the town?

Kar: The town was small. I couldn't tell you -

Ken: Was it a factory community or not - did the whole life of the community revolve around the factory?

Kar: Around the factory, plus farming, and woodcutting. They had a small sawmill.

Ken: Who ran the town?

Kar: I wouldn't know.

Ken: What kind of an education did your parents really want you to have?

Kar: My father was still dreaming when these women wanted me to go to high school, which wasn't in that town, he was hoping that by next year maybe my health will be better, I will be working, and be glad to see you go to high school. Before that happened my father passed away, so I never saw high school.

Ken: What about your brothers - I mean this is a European family - how did they feel about your brothers' as opposed to your future?

Kar: I don't know. I wouldn't say that there was any difference. Not with my father, and I think that my mother took it that way too.

Ken: Oh, this is the question I wanted to ask you - jumping from town to town like this - how did that affect your education?

Kar: It didn't affect too much. In fact I passed grades. At first I didn't start school until my brother did, next to me. I was ill. I was very, very ill when we first came to this country. I don't know to this day what it was, but I had a sleeping sickness like. I would stand up somewhere, and I would be sleeping. Whatever it was.

Ken: Oh, for goodness sakes. You know Harriet Tubman had that ailment.

Kar: Really. That's strange.

Ken: You know, the famous slave woman.

Kar: I don't know. I read about her. Well, I had that for several years, so when my brother started school I started the first grade with him. But I already knew arithmetic, because my father was teaching me. I already knew geography, although it was in Lithuanian, but it was easy for me to translate it. I knew quite a bit of other things that he could teach me, so when I started the first grade I was there maybe a month and was transferred to second, and from second to third. I was really in third grade. And then the following year I skipped also a grade. I had four years and I graduated from grammar school.

Ken: I see. When you were going to school, was there any difference between boys training and women's training?

Kar: Not in grade school, no.

Ken: You said these girls at school told you about the factory where you could do cottage work -

Kar: That was when we came to Vermont.

Ken: In the place you finally settled in, Vermont, what kind of friends did you make. Were you able to make friends in school, girl friends?

Kar: Oh, yes. I had quite a few girl friends. In fact that's where I started to write. They had a school paper there in grade school. They had a school paper, and I wrote little stories. I used to love to read. I read all kinds of stories, Alger Hiss, no - Horatio Alger Jr., and Louise Alcott books. I used to read wherever I could grab a book. And in spite of the fact that I had to help my mother after I got home from school, I still used to read an awful lot hidden in the closet. Really in a dish closet. And that's where I used to take a candle, light it up and read. I don't know how long, but I read until I fell asleep. Mother used to be angry at me, but I couldn't help it. I just loved to read. Finally I began to write little stories, of life, of having brothers, where we lived, and so on, and it was accepted in the school paper.

Ken: Do you still have any of those stories?

Kar: I might, and I might not. [laughter]. And then I had a good hand. My father taught me how to make maps. So I used to make maps. And these maps were also published. Handmade maps. You know they would take a picture and publish it. When I graduated I got a lot of gifts and I got a lot of comments.

Ken: I'll be darned.

Kar: Later I'll show you what I am making - even now occasionally.

Ken: When you were young - everybody who is young has fantasies about what they want to be, dreams about the future.

Kar: I wanted to be an artist. That was my main dream. When I was in Philadelphia I belonged to singing clubs, and we put up plays. Various plays ^{used} ~~ed~~ I acted in, and occasionally I ~~used~~ ^{used} to go to museums and see the paintings. Oh, I just loved them. No chance to learn.

Ken: You mentioned when you came home you had to help your mother. What about your brothers, did they help her too?

Kar: Oh, yes. We all worked. Even my little brothers used clean up around where he was sleeping. He would make his own bed and everything - at four or five years old. Yes we all did. And we didn't begrudge, like some children say "Oh, I don't want to do this". We never said that.

Ken: Did you have any time for fun after school?

Kar: Very little

Ken: What little time you had, how did you spend it?

Kar: We used to go skiing once in a while - not skiing, skating in winter, very little. My brothers used to go swimming but of course being a girl I couldn't go in the swimming hole with the boys. I didn't even learn how to swim. But that's about all. I didn't learn how to dance or anything. I don't know how to dance to this day. I had a chance when I grew up, but I hated to show that I didn't know how.

Ken: You made friends with girls at school. What did you do with them at school?

Kar: Well, we talked. Sometimes - I used to like handwork too. This on the table was crocheted by me several years ago when I had time. [laughter]

Ken: Between writing books.

Kar: I liked that, and the girls would bring something that they were making, and I was making, and we would talk. I had very little good times when I was young.

Ken: How did your mother ^{ADOLESCENCE} tell you about menstruation and sex?

Kar: She didn't tell me. But we girls talking after school found out that girls do menstruate. You've got to be very, very careful, and if the boys would see a drop of blood on you, that blood on you, then you were going to have a baby, and that's a disgrace. So one day I came home and there was a spot on my dress. When I saw that I took off the dress and washed it and I began to cry and I cried for about three days and I didn't go to school, and my mother started asking questions and I began to cry and I said, "I know you are not going to like me any more. I am going to have a baby! And my mother said "No, what do you mean? When did that happen?" I said, "After school. I was playing in the yard and I didn't know." ^{She} Said "You didn't know? What do you mean you didn't know?" You know she thought I - the other way. And I said, "Well, how would I know. When I came home I took my dress off and I only found out there was a spot on there." So she looked at me, she said, "Is that all?" I said, "What do you mean, that's all, aren't the women getting a baby because the boys see the blood?" She says "No." She says, "You crazy thing. Forget it. Just watch yourself. It's not nice to get spots on you." And that was all, She didn't tell me any more than

Ken: Did she ever tell you how you had babies?

Kar: ^{No} I already knew that the baby grows inside of a mother but we didn't know how it happened.

Ken: How did you ever find out?

- Kar: I don't really remember. Reading I think. I think after that I was interested and got some books from the library. She was too careful not to mention anything and not to say anything that the only thing she gave me was relief after three days of crying that I wasn't going to have a baby from that.
- Ken: How do you think religion influenced her attitude toward sex? Toward telling you about things.
- Kar: I don't know whether it was religion or whether it was ingrown from her parents, an ingrown attitude or something. I don't know.
- Ken: What preparation did you have for married life, then?
- Kar: By that time I know because I read. In fact not only read but I, before I got married even, when I started working with that Lithuanian paper, I even got a batch of books because I saw how women, many of these Lithuanian women, had big families and they didn't want them. And I finally got from - Oh, what's her name - see how I lose names at times.
- Ken: You are not alone. It wouldn't be Kate Richards O'Hare would it?
- Kar: Oh no. This woman who was arrested for her books and all.
- Ken: Oh, I know. [shut off tape while we both tried to remember the name of Margaret Sanger]
- Kar: I got Margaret Sanger's books, and I was selling them to the women that I knew. I distributed a couple hundred of those books among the Lithuanian women.
- Ken: What did you plan as far as marriage and children were concerned?
- Kar: I planned I would have as many as I want and no more, and naturally my first baby after I got married, I lost it when I got arrested during the Palmer raids.
- Ken: When you were young, did you think about marriage at all?
- Kar: Yes I always wanted to have a girl of my own.
- Ken: What kind of a man did you expect to marry?
- Kar: I didn't plan. [laughter] It just happened, I guess.

Ken: Let's get into world war I now. Let's see. Your father passed away

Kar: In 1915

Ken: And you mentioned you just couldn't stay home (we'll get into that later). Was there any discussion in your family about the McNamara case on the West Coast. Did people know about the McNamara case?

Kar: Very little. I knew that through the newspaper, because at that time this newspaper had articles in it. Of course we read it to the other people, publishing it.

Ken: What did you know about trade unions. For instance, the shirtwaiste strike in New York, and the Women's Trade Union -

Kar: That we knew the same way. I knew about it from reading, and feeling that these people should have had strong unions. That's the way the paper also had written.

Ken: What did your family feel about the war?

Kar: Well, my mother especially, was very worried about World War I. She was very much worried that if the war continues maybe my brother would have to go. But the war ended before he had to go. And World War I worried my father - no, my father was dead - my mother. She was saying Lithuania is being devastated by the war, how it will pick up.

You see my father died in 1915 before the Russian Revolution. He would have been so glad to know about it because he suffered from the Czarist regime. Otherwise he would have lived there.

Ken: Let's see. I don't know whether to go into your marriage now or into your first job and the labor paper. Let's stop and discuss it.

Ken: OK. We've discussed it. We've decided to go into your marriage first. How did you meet your husband?

Kar: I met him at one of the affairs that the Lithuanians had in Philadelphia, a singing club.

Ken: I see. And how long did you know each other before you got married?

Kar: I'd say about a year - less than a year.

Ken: How were you courted?

Kar: I think the usual way. We went out to picnics - to various

Kam: Was your social life together mainly in the Lithuanian community?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: Where did you finally get married?

Kar: When? We got married in Philadelphia in 1918, July 4th. It is fifty nine years this year.

Ken: And who was there?

Kar: Just friends were there - a couple that stood up for us, that was all. There was no white veil.

Ken: Was it a church marriage?

Kar: No. A justice of the peace.

Ken: How did your mother feel about your being married?

Kar: She was different. It's a story in itself.

Ken: Tell me.

Kar: When father passed away - my father belonged to a Lithuanian society which gives benefit during illness. It is like an insurance. And at death you get five hundred dollars. And so she was paying for that. And when my father passed away my mother wanted him buried in a Catholic cemetery and have a Catholic priest officiate. And there was only one Catholic church in town, Irish. This church was mostly for the Irish people I guess. So we went down there and we asked the priest, and he knew my father was not a ~~Catholic~~ church goer. And he said "That man didn't go to church, did he?" And I said "No." And he said, "Well, I can't ^{bring} him into church." Then my mother said, "Can't you officiate anyway?" So he said, "Yes, I can do that. How much money has she got?" And I asked my mother, and she said, "Well, I have no money. I am going to get five hundred dollars from the society, and I've got burial to pay, and all that." He said, "Oh, that will be enough." That's the truth. I was there. And so my mother cried and she says, "I want him buried Catholic." So we went through with that. She brought him to church, but not all the way, just in the vestibule. He officiated and then he went to the cemetery and also officiated. At the same time at the cemetery there was a speaker from the paper that my father had worked - a double ceremony there. After

Kar: that we went home, and when mother started to pick up after father's death, she never went to church again.

Ken: Oh, for goodness sake.

Kar: She never said much, but she kept that within herself. And here, when she was dying here in Oakland at the hospital, the nurse asked me what religion she is. Could she have a priest. And I said no, I don't think she wants a priest. We are non religious right now. And the priest did come. My mother told him to get out. She turned around and she saw a priest, and she says, "Get out." So that ended religion with her.

Ken: Did you tell her about your marriage? Did you ask her if you should get married?

Kar: I told her I was getting married because I lived in Philadelphia and she lived in - she moved from Vermont to Massachusetts. And I told her I met a young man. I wanted to get married. and she said you've got your own life. You do what's right. So she never objected.

Ken: How did your brothers feel about it?

Kar: My brothers. I don't think that they felt one way or the other. ^{They knew} I was older and had my own life.

Ken: How did you and your husband feel politically?

Kar: We were both left wingers. Both joined the socialist party, had been in the Socialist Party.

Ken: Did you agree on mostly everything?

Kar: Yes. Very much so.

Ken: Did you have any disagreements?

Kar: No. I haven't had any, and I think I am lucky that way

Ken: Sixty years?

Kar: Fifty nine.

Ken: Almost sixty

Ken: What about household chores?

Kar: When I go out somewhere, or go away (I've been going away a lot) on speaking tours, or when I come back from these various congresses, or for instance right now when I have these various meetings, with him it's all right. If there is something left in the house to eat, he'll eat it. If not, he'll make his own. He helps me with housework and all.

Ken: An ideal marriage.

Ken: Did you discuss your plans for your future?

Kar: We had some discussions about family, and we planned on having no more than two children, or maybe one. But if things worked out we would have had two.

Ken: When you had friendships with other women, did it change when you got married. I mean was the attitude of your single friends different toward you?

Kar: No.

Ken: Or your married friends?

Kar: No, none. It made no difference. We remained very well adjusted to it.

Ken: When you had your first pregnancy, was it planned?

Kar: It was sort of planned. Yes. We didn't exactly know when, but we thought the first one, whenever I got pregnant, we'll have it.

Ken: You didn't use Margaret Sanger's methods then?

Kar: No, not at that time.

Ken: Would it upset you to tell me about how you lost your first child?

Kar: Well, it was during the - let's see - 1919 - I was -

Ken: Wait a minute.

End of Tape

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross
Date of Interview - Saturday, July 23, 1977
Home of Ms. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall
Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin Tape #2

CHILDREN
Ken: We were talking about the Palmer raids. How pregnant were you?

Kar: About six and a half months.

Ken: What happened?

Kar: We were arrested in the evening, both of us, and brought to a Philadelphia jail. And the next morning I began to get ill. I called for a doctor and they wouldn't bring one. I was put in with all the prostitutes there, and they were very, very good to me. They all realized that was happening. I even hardly knew what was happening. I thought maybe it will blow over. And finally they saw that my water broke, and they began to put whatever they had under me. Finally after a lot of screaming and knocking on the door they finally got attention from the warden, and they brought in a doctor, and I was sent to a hospital.

Ken: I think we ought to get into the Palmer raid arrests later, so we won't go into that now; When did you have your second child, then?

Kar: In October ^{10th} 21st of 1921. Almost a couple of years later?

Ken: How did you raise her?

Kar: Wherever I went I took her with me since she was a baby. I went to meetings. I went to various affairs. If we both went, we took her. If I went alone, I took her. She was a very good baby. Just put her on a chair and she would sleep. Then she began going to school and my husband at first took care of her more because I began to work. And when I began working in the union a lot of nights. I had to stay out nights, So she grew up with him practically because he was home nights. They used to make their meals and wash their dishes and go to a show or something. She was more with him than she was with me.

Ken: In other words, your husband wasn't as active as you although he believed in the same things?

Kar: Some of the things, he wasn't. Some of the places he wasn't. Like union work, or organizing. No, he wasn't with me. He speaks worse English than I do. Although I was raised here, I don't have that college or high school, or what you may call it -
[laughter]

Ken: I don't either.

Kar: Well, anyway, I don't have that language, but I manage.

Ken: Academic, that's the word.

Kar: As far as my husband is concerned, he is poor at speaking, so he doesn't go everywhere like I go. I went to various conventions. Of course, at that time, local conventions, so they stayed together all the time. And she graduated here in Oakland from high school.*

Ken: Did she ever feel that she was being neglected in any way?

Kar: No, she didn't. She realized, and she still does.

Ken: Did you pass on anything to her that you learned from your mother?

Kar: Except that part of history, how I grew up, that was all.

Ken: For instance, you do a lot of needle work and stuff. Did you learn that from your mother?

Kar: No. She was never interested in that. She was a good reader. She wanted to spend her time reading and learning. She was a very good student. In fact in high school here she was editor of the high school paper. And then she went to college. She took a correspondence course, and she graduated in that, you know, a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Ken: In other words, your father and you and she are all writers.

Kar: Yes. And even now, occasionally where she lives, she writes articles for the paper. But she's been home since she got married.

*Named Eugenia, after Eugene Debs

Ken: What was the difference in the way you raised her and the way your mother raised you?

Kar: The difference to that extent that she didn't suffer as much as I suffered - hardship. Because during that period that we were raising her we had enough to eat. We always had enough of everyday comforts. Of course it was not my mother's fault. That was the fault of those day's conditions, and the conditions under which my parents lived.

Ken: What about you. You didn't have a very close relationship with your mother. Did you have a close relationship with your daughter?

Kar: Yes, she had a very close relationship with both of us - more so maybe with her ~~had~~ than with myself. But I think she did.

Ken: Did you ever have mother-daughter talks with her?

Kar: Yes. I did from the very beginning.

Ken: When you shared in the raising of your daughter, how did you make decisions about her? Was she included in the discussion?

Kar: She was always included. And now that she is raising her family it's the same thing. And she's got a lovely family.

Ken: What were your expectations for her?

Kar: Well, we wanted something I lacked and I wanted so bad - education. We wanted her to have all the education she could possibly have. She graduated here and started to work at the Oakland Tribune. And finally the war was on and she felt like we did to do everything we possibly can for the war. So she went to Philadelphia to Temple University, blueprint reading. So she took that up for another year. She quit the job here and went over there, and finally she came back here and worked at Marchand's Calculating Machine thinking that she was helping the war effort. And she worked there until she got married.

Ken: Who handled the finances in your family?

Kar: Both of us. We never argued over that. If I want something I say, "Have you got any left", and he gives it to me.

Kar: If he wants something, he says "Have you got any money?", and I give it to him. And we get along very nicely.

Ken: Why do you think your marriage has lasted so long while other marriages have gone by the board? Everybody, we hear, is getting divorced, or one thing or another.

Kar: We don't hide anything from each other. We are friendly towards each other- as friends also - not only as a married couple. I think that has a lot to do with it.

Ken: How many grandchildren do you have?

Kar: Two. My daughter was of the same opinion, that she would have one or two, but she decided two. And she said, "If I have children, I will either have two or none." Because she grew up alone, no brothers or sisters, no relatives practically.

Ken: Why didn't you have more than one?

Kar: Well, I would have had two.

Ken: Why didn't you have another one?

Kar: After that we thought it was enough. I had trouble with the first one, and we didn't know how easy it's going to be to manage with one, and we decided not to.

Ken: Well, I think that covers your married life - not too thoroughly, but now we'll get on to your adult life. You said you were interested in Margaret Sanger and knew about her. What about womens' suffrage. Did you ever think about that?

Kar: Yes, I did, ^{WOMENS' SUFFRAGE} and I was in it, marched along with them in that period and would help those that were arrested.

Ken: What organization did you belong to?

Kar: Just the Women's Suffrage they called it. If there was any other name I don't know it. I was no official. I just went along with the group.

Ken: Did you belong to the organization?

Kar: No, Not any particular organization. No. At that time the women had these different organizations. I didn't belong. I belonged to the Young Socialists League. They were a part of that. They were working towards

Kar: for women's suffrage, so through them I got into it, not as a member. It was not a Lithuanian. It was a national movement, the Young Socialist League.

Ken: Aslong as we are into ^{POLITICS} that we might as well go into your politics a little bit, and then we'll go into the other things later.

How did you first become interested in organized politics? Your father was a radical - and, how did you first become interested in belonging to something?

Kar: Because also of my father. You see we lived in a small town. There was no possibility of organizing or belonging to anything like that. He gave me the thought that if I am ever away from that I should be in that movement. I went to Philadelphia and took a job as bookkeeper in a Socialist paper.

Ken: How did you get the job?

Kar: I got it through a newspaper. Some of our boarders belonged to the Socialist Party, and eventually they signed me up as secretary of the branch. I was a child. My father was still living. He joined in the last few months, I guess, of his life. He joined it officially. He was always a part, but didn't belong until just before he passed away. So that's how I got in it. They needed a secretary. They needed a secretary for their branch in Vermont, and I joined that with them. And that was a language branch, Lithuanian. And there was an advertisement in the newspaper for bookkeeper for that newspaper, Kova, it's called, K O V A, and that means struggle. So I answered. They encouraged me. You see, my father had just passed away then, and these same boarders that were with my mother, they encouraged me to write, since I couldn't stay there. They advised me to go away somewhere. So they encouraged me to go ahead and write to them, that I could be a bookkeeper. Now, that's another story, if you want, about the bookkeeper. We'll do that on your jobs.

Ken: So then, when you moved and became a bookkeeper, you were a member of the Socialist Party there?

Kar: No, I became a bookkeeper when I still worked in the chair factory.

Ken: When did you become a member of -

Kar: The Socialist Party? I became a member when these boarders, when my father and these boarders -

Ken: Then the socialist party in 1919 -

Kar: That's the Communist Party -

Ken: Yes, the Communist Party split with the Socialist Party. Did you go along with the split?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: Why.

Kar: Because I believed in that. I believed that that was the right party and the right program and I joined it.

Ken: What would you consider yourself first, a trade unionist, a peace worker, or a communist?

Kar: That's another hard question. Politically I am a communist, and what would you call the other?

Ken: Economically, I guess.

Kar: Economically I am a trade unionist, or was a trade unionist, and now I was in peace work later because of the wars.

Ken: How did you combine your political interests with your union activities?

Kar: I had no hard time combining. I didn't preach communism. I didn't have to. First of all I believed in people getting whatever they can from that particular work that they were doing, and then from then on it's up to them. I didn't go around preaching because the two can be combined.

Ken: I see - How did being in the party influence your trade union work.

Kar: I think it helped me because if I had a problem I always had other comrades who could discuss it with me, and I think it helped.

Ken: I see. Why did you go into full time union work instead of full time party work?

Kar: Because I think I was more capable of doing that, because politically I didn't have that much knowledge or that much education. And as far as organizing, my being a

Kar: worker from my childhood, I felt I was able to do it.

Ken: I know that quite a lot of people were pulled out of trade union work into party leadership, and why weren't you?

Kar: I still felt I was more capable of doing that.

Ken: Here's another question that I think everybody has had. When you were active in the Communist Party, did you agree fully with all the changes in policy?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: You did. I was going to ask you what you disagreed on, and why. In the party did you ever find there was any difficulty or difference in the way you were treated as a woman and men were treated as men in the party?

Kar: I didn't feel that way. No.

Ken: There was a lot of talk about equality, and I wondered how it was carried out.

Kar: It was carried out well as far as I am concerned. I had no trouble.

Ken: What would you say was your goal as a political person when you first joined?

Kar: To do what I can to help others, and that was all. I mean, I wanted to study, learn as much as I can to draw in others, to explain to them. When you are a party member you think of what you can do to help the people. And by helping I mean whatever the struggles are. To join those struggles, to get other people into those struggles - political struggles for the betterment of our political life - economic struggles, because the party is interested in that very much. They want to help, and that is what my thoughts were.

Ken: Did you think at that time socialism was possible in the United States?

Kar: Not exactly, but I thought the time might come and we have to prepare for it, we have to explain to the people, educate them for it. But you can't just overturn overnight and believe it is going to come.

Ken: How do you think your continued activities have helped toward realizing your goals?

Kar: That's hard to answer. Well, I think I was instrumental in the educational line. And the people that I met, those that I talked to, I explained what I know, and sold a lot of literature, ^{ING} gave them literature, so I feel that that's the way I helped. I wasn't a leader - a political leader. I didn't feel like I was one.

Ken: Yet you have travelled all over the world, and spoken.

Kar: I have spoken and have travelled all over the world. But I didn't travel as a political leader. I travelled as a peace worker. And I travelled as a union member, but not as a leading political worker.

Ken: As long as we are ^{PEACE MOVEMENT} doing things piecemeal we'll get into the peace movement, then. You said you went to the World Peace Conference in Amsterdam in 1932, were you involved in peace work prior to 1932?

Kar: I was. At that time there was already in the newspapers reports from Europe, especially in Germany, that the Germans were preparing for another war. And of course I am a Lithuanian by birth and Lithuania suffered. You know armies went back and forth through Lithuanian and devastated the country, and my thought was there it is going to be again. And I was a manager of a Lithuanian women's paper and I felt that this paper and our women should elect somebody to go to this peace congress. That was my first trip to the peace congress in 1932.

Ken: The paper sent you?

Kar: No, the womens' organizations, the Lithuanian womens' organizations, plus a group here that was locally organized just for a short time, a peace group. They gave me a mandate too to go. I forgot ^{what} the name was. It is just called peace group, union women, and some of the women were party women and others, and a small group started that organization. They gave me a mandate, and then the Lithuanian group. They had a progressive womens', they sent me.

Ken: And what did you do there?

Kar: When I got there, there wasn't too many women, there were mostly men, so we were just a handful of women as I remember. There were about two thousand delegates. It was a big congress, and it was considered a radical congress, because even Holland, which was at that time not too much against the Soviet Union, would not permit even Maxim Gorky to come in to that congress. They didn't give him the right to come to Holland. And at that congress, because there were so few women, I think we were more in the midst of groups, and I was immediately attached to a group that was going to draw up theses for future activities. There I met very important people like Katayama* from Japan. In fact he took me under his wing because he thought that it was important since he was in America and he knew American politics. So he pushed me into committees and I was very happy about it, glad to have known him. And then there were a few other important people that I got acquainted with. At the moment I can't think of their names. They were from various countries.

Ken: Did they push women towards leadership in that conference?

Kar: Katayama was the one that really was pushing. Myself and a couple of the other women who were there, he tried to get them into various committees, congress committees plus the national committee. There was another woman and myself. Now I had that somewhere and I can't find it. So we were pushed on this national committee that was supposed to call another congress which never came about.

* Sen Katayama "...was a foremost fighter against Japanese and American imperialism..." "A founder of the Communist Party of Japan, he was also the builder of its trade union movement. In this country [United States] he was, at first, a member of the Socialist Party. He was active in the left wing of that party, which served as the basis for the organization of the Communist Party.." From preface to The Heritage of Sen Katayama, written by Karl Yoneda. Preface was written by the History Commission CPUSA [Communist Party United States of America].

Ken: Yes, because of, I see. [the war in Europe].
How did you implement what you learned there?

Kar: When I came back I travelled to these various groups we had in various cities, Lithuanian Womens' Progressive Alliance, and gave my report on what this congress meant and what we can do.

I had a chance to go to the Soviet Union that time. They gave myself a trip, and two others. There was Sherwood ^{Anderson} there, and Dana ^W ². We went on the same train. We went to Germany, stayed overnight there, and then from Germany went to the Soviet Union with them.

Ken: Who paid for that, the Soviet Union?

Kar: I don't know about them, no, the Lithuanian organizations paid for mine. They continued paying, they paid for the Congress plus my going to the Soviet Union. I had a chance to meet those important people. And we stayed in Germany overnight and planned about the Congress and had a discussion there, very interesting, And saw German prostitutes. That night we went out, oh it was late at night, about eleven o'clock. They wanted to have some blintzes, or something of that sort. No, potatoe pancakes, and they asked me if I wanted to go with them. So we went out, and before we got to the restaurant a couple of prostitutes grabbed them [laughter] and they didn't know what to do, one on one side, and one on the other. That was how bad it was in Germany in 1932. Then I got, through the International Labor Defense office in Moscow, I went there. And while I was there a Negro group that was sent to the Soviet Union, or they invited them, to produce a film, and that film was supposed to have been black and white. They were already there. And while they were there, I don't know the details, they found that that film was not the right kind for that moment. It was a film that (I can't explain it) but something was wrong with it anyway, and they decided either to postpone it or scrap it and make another.

Kar: So the Black people were given a tour of the Soviet Union in the Southern part, Central Asia. That's Bukhara, Tadjik^{istan}, Uzbekistan, and the City of Baku and Caucuses, and all those places, and I was attached to it. There were twelve of them, and I was the thirteenth of that group. And we had the most wonderful travel in the Soviet Union at that time because they wanted to show them how Soviet Union adjusts their racial minorities. And it was very important. And we travelled on a train. Our home was the train. And part of the way we went on the Volga on a boat. Then the rest of the time we went on the train. When we got there they showed us the culture of the people. They showed us how these nomads lived, and how they tried to educate them, and get them to live permanently on the spot - they pull up and go. It was most interesting and I think that it was the most educational trip that I have ever had in my life. It was three weeks.

Ken: Were you the only woman?

Kar: No, there were six black women. And you know who was with us - Langston Hughes, the poet, and this Matt Crawford that's living here in Berkeley. I don't know if you have heard of him. He was in that group, and then there were, of course, other women and men. It was a very interesting trip.

End of first side of tape

Second side of second tape

Counter #1

Kar: I was happy to see that some of the women (that was in 1932) and so many years after the revolution, women were still wearing these, paranja's they called them, face covering. Those that dared to take off, many of these women were killed by their own husbands or fathers because they dared to take that off. They were so afraid to take them off. However, there were already women in the government. There were women already in schools, various places where women could not be. And these Black people were amazed to see that. This whole

Kar: thing was crumbling. There was no more discrimination. They were so happy, and I am sure that Langston Hughes at that time wrote poetry on it, books, and he made speeches. And when I came back I toured for six months the U.S.A. giving talks on that. I gave talks in English and I gave talks in Lithuanian, mostly in Lithuanian.

Ken: To Progressive Lithuanian Women's groups?

Kar: Yes, various groups throughout the country, from Maine to Chicago, and all over. Also in some places where some of the organizations, English organizations had meetings. So that was for six months. I told them what I saw. How they were adjusting the lives of the people; that those that were discriminated, those that were nomads, in general how people lived, and how women, especially the women, how happy they were to get the education, to know that they were becoming equal.

Ken: How were you received?

Kar: Very well, except Canada wouldn't let me in.

Ken: Why?

Kar: I don't know. Canada at that time, I went in. As soon as I went in they arrested me and took away all my literature, and everything, and sent me back to the United States. They didn't want any of that.

Ken: Were you put in jail there?

Kar: Oh, no. Just the border patrol.

Ken: Did you have any difficulties on this trip?

Kar: No. I had a lot of questions put to me, and some of these questions were from people who were opposing the Soviet Union. But there was no trouble anywhere.

Ken: How did you tie this up with your work as a trade unionist?

Kar: Well at that time I hadn't done much here locally. My main work was as a trade unionist when I came here to California and started organizing. Well, in 1932 I had just started here. It didn't interfere.

Ken: Why have you kept such close ties with your Lithuanian background?

Kar: Well, it's hard to tell. Maybe because it is in respect to my father, or whether it was because of

Kar: my birth there. When I went in 1960 for the first time to Lithuania (in 1932 I didn't go there because it was under fascist rule at that time), but when I went in 1960, which was already under the Soviets, I felt sort of like coming home because I knew that was my birthplace, although I am American and have nothing against America from that point of view. But it is hard to tell.

Ken: What have you learned in the course of your work for peace?

Kar: I have learned that it is a hard struggle and unless the people are aroused to it we may have a third world war. But it is up to us to understand, see if we can arouse the population to protest and to go along with this thought that we have got to stop this armament race. that we have got to live together in this same world. Otherwise we will have no world.

Ken: Now you have kept on working for peace all through the years.

Kar: Right.

Ken: How do you feel about this theory of just and unjust wars.

Kar: Like the Vietnam War?

Ken: Well, the theory that the revolution in the United States was a just war.

Kar: Right. It was a just war.

Ken: Well, then, the peace movement that you are involved in, does it determine just and unjust wars? An unjust war is what?

Kar: An unjust war is a war of aggression like the war of aggression in Vietnam. We had no business to stick our nose in there, or the war in South America in different places. As soon as the people try to have an uprising and get their own government, immediately we butt in. That's an unjust war. I don't believe in that. And even now, what's going on in Africa. When we go, it's all right. When the Soviet Union goes, it's not all right.

Kar: I think let the people themselves decide what they want, not to butt in on one side or the other.

Ken: Does everybody in the peace movement feel this way?

Kar: I think so, because I belong with Women for Peace Now, and I belong to the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and what I get from their bulletins and go to their meetings, it is so. They believe that people should live in peace and we shouldn't have the right to butt in.

Ken: I may think of some other questions on peace later on. I think we'll stop for now on that.

Oh, I thought of another question. What happened to all your peace work during the war?

Kar: During the war we turned to helping the U.S. and the Allies win because we wanted to win against Hitler, at that time already marching through Europe, and we felt that we should help in every way we can. And in my union, we appealed to our union members, those who were healthy and could, to give all the blood they wanted.

Ken: Oh, I know. We'll get that later. [shut off tape for discussion on reason]. *FIRST JOB*

Let's get back to your chronological life then. You started to tell me why you left school. You had graduated from grammar school, they had wanted to send you to high school, and you had wanted to go, of course. Did you discuss this with your father and mother?

Kar: I did, and my father wanted me to go, and he says it's up to your mother, if she can get by without your work. I mean I was already working in the factory. I talked to mother and she said, "I could let you go, but it's going to be an awful struggle. you had better not!" She said, "maybe next year." I had no chance.

Ken: You mentioned that there was a law that you were not able to work until you were fourteen?

Kar: Right. The State of Massachusetts (at that time I was in Massachusetts) - no, wait a minute, Vermont. Vermont

Kar: had a law that you could only start working when you were fourteen. And I was at that time just thirteen. So my father made some kind of a paper from my birth certificate that we got from Lithuania. He changed it somehow that it showed that I was fourteen, and I started working in the chair factory sandpapering chairs. And that was very hard work for a young girl, and I wasn't too strong. Had to lift the chair up on a bench and sand it with the sandpaper.

But I won a prize for handwriting in school, the Palmer method, and the Palmer method gave me a certificate. And the boss knew about it. So he used to call me in for about an hour, or something like that, during the day to put in a book the types of chairs that already went through. I started that way, and he always said, "You'd like to be a bookkeeper, wouldn't you?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "I'll show you." And he kept showing me a little more and a little more until I finally began to work four hours, and the other time for chair sanding. Finally he gave me almost full time in his office, and he showed me the books, the various books, how to work them.

Ken: Was he a Lithuanian?

Kar: No, that was just a factory. And he started to show me how to do it, and I was so interested that I started asking him questions too. And he was very patient. He was an elderly man and knew that I wanted to go to school badly. He used to show me and explain how the books are kept in offices and everywhere. So I had just an idea on many things because he didn't have to keep that far. But as far as he kept, he gave it to me, how to work it. So I finally, as I told you, when this newspaper advertised for a bookkeeper, I thought, well I have to go away from there anyway, so I am going to apply for the job. So I wrote to them, and they asked me how old I was, and I told them I was eighteen.

Ken: [laughter] you're getting old fast.

Kar: and they asked me if I knew bookkeeping. I said, "I think I do." Is this your own handwriting? I answered, "Yes, it is." So they told me to come, and I was only making four dollars a week for fifty five hours a week.

Ken: I want to stop you here for a minute. When you had to leave school and go to work, how did you feel?

Kar: Well, I felt bad I couldn't go to school. I wanted to work and help my family, sure.

Ken: What plans did you have for finishing your education?

Kar: To go to night school, maybe. But I had no chance, even at that, because they didn't have a night school high school. They only had for languages and things like that in a small town.

Ken: You continued to live at home, didn't you?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: What changes did your working make in the family relationship? How did you feel about relationship to your family?

Kar: I felt that I have to help them, and I did. That's the way I felt.

Ken: How were you treated when you first started to bring money into the family.

Kar: No different.

Ken: I mean, did they consider you an adult then?

Kar: I don't think they felt that way. They felt that I was already old enough to help, maybe that way.

Ken: Were you still treated as a child?

Kar: No. I wouldn't say child. I don't think I was treated as a child even then, before that. Because I used to help and go out and help others with language and things like that.

Ken: I just wondered if there was any sudden change when you started bringing home money.

Kar: No. Except mother said she would save some of my money to get me something pretty. I gave all my money to my mother.

Ken: Oh, you did, and you ate at home, and -

Kar: That's right. I even helped her because she worked awfully hard.

Ken: Now I want to know how you got your job in the chair factory.

Kar: That's all there was as far as work in that town. I had to apply, and they accepted me.

Ken: And there were how many other workers there?

Kar: About five hundred.

Ken: What were conditions like in the factory?

Kar: Well, in those days there weren't much conditions. We had no rest periods, we had a half hour for lunch, and we worked ten hours.

Ken: How many days a week?

Kar: Five and a half.

Ken: And how much money did you make?

Kar: Four fifty.

Ken: Were there any sanitary facilities there?

Kar: Well, they had a bathroom, a washroom, I mean a sink.

Ken: How many for five hundred people?

Kar: That I don't know.

Ken: How many people worked in the area where you worked sandpapering chairs?

Kar: There must have been about twenty five, or something like that.

Ken: How old were they?

Kar: Some were young men. There was only a couple of women there.

Ken: Did you all do the same work?

Kar: Some of them packed chairs; some of them wrapped them; some of them were sandpapering, those that went back to the factory. In the other corner they were wrapping them, those that were ready.

Ken: Did women get the same wages as men?

Kar: No, oh no.

Ken: Did women doing the same work get the same wages as men?

Kar: No. I don't know how much they got, but they got more. I couldn't say exactly.

Ken: Was this ever discussed by the women?

Kar: It was. Sometimes these men would tease us or something, and then we would slap back at them, "Well, you are making more." If we had to get something, pick up

Kar: something, we would say, "Well, you go. You are making more money, so you go." We would shoot back at them.

Ken: Did you ever think of doing anything about it?

Kar: No, not those days. Somehow we took it for granted. But we felt it. We really did. I don't know. There was no idea of organizing or anything. We just took it for granted.

Ken: Did you make new friends there outside of your own circle?

Kar: Naturally, those that worked there, we all were friendly. If anybody got sick, we visited them. We would collect a few pennies. It was a friendly group. You know, a small town. Everybody knew each other.

Ken: What did you talk about?

Kar: I don't know. I just don't remember very well that time. Well, they had a party, they talked about parties. If somebody was ill, they talked about that. Just small things. There was nothing big that was spoken there.

Ken: It was a family type thing?

Kar: Yes. Everybody knew each other, and everybody knew who lived in town. That's the way it was.

Ken: And the boss, what would you call it, paternalistic?

Kar: Yes. Very much so. He was a very friendly fellow, not like bosses where I worked later in the textile factories. They were driving you and all that. But no, this one was a nice fellow. But you had to get your job done. There is no question about it, if you didn't maybe he would just let you go. He wasn't a driver. He was one of the fellows that lived there. We all knew him. Of course he lived in a better home, and all that.

Ken: When you learned to do bookkeeping and went to work in the office, did he give you any more money?

Kar: No. He didn't. First it was just a small help. Then he helped me by rights. He told me more. I kept asking questions about bookkeeping, and he would say, "No, this is it, and this is it." He helped me, and that's how I learned the mechanics of it. But I wasn't

Kar: experienced in any way, or knew how to go in an office and start working. But I thought I did.

Ken: I see. How long did you work there before your father passed away?

Kar: Just about a year. Not quite a year, because I started - when he passed away I was only fourteen. So it was just within a year.

Ken: Now I want to talk about this socialist group that the boarders got together and you and your father belonged to it.

Kar: Yes. So I didn't understand, then, much. I belonged to it because they wanted me as a secretary. I could write well.

Ken: Not because you were a woman, but because you could write?

Kar: I could write, so I could be a secretary, so I was elected secretary. And I had to join, naturally, because I had to send the reports to the national office.

Ken: And what were the meetings like?

Kar: As far as I remember they discussed what's happening. I think my father or some of the others would bring out questions, that in such and such a country there was a revolution, and in another country there was a strike; and that's how I learned what a strike meant but had no idea how it is conducted or anything. Protesting working conditions - that was a strike when they went out and didn't want to work until conditions were better.

Ken: What did they do about these things?

Kar: What do you mean? They just discussed. Sometimes they collected a few pennies and sent to help them. Especially at that time there were a lot of strikes in Massachusetts, textile strikes. I don't remember any in particular. I am not going to say. They used to collect a few pennies, say a couple of dollars among all of them. That was big money in those days, and they would send that as a strike donation.

Ken: I mean, as a socialist group, what did they do in their own community?

Kar: Nothing they could do there. It was more or less an educational group. In the community we had nothing happening and it was left that way.

Ken: Let's see, you were fifteen then, and the war was going on, wasn't it?

Kar: No, not until seventeen.

Ken: The war in Europe, 1912, I think?

Kar: Oh, no, fourteen.

Ken: I keep thinking - because you were only thirteen. I keep getting mixed up. Are you sure you are going to be seventy six and not only seventy three?
[laughter]

Kar: I'm positive.

Ken: You said you added four years.

Kar: I was born in 1901.

Ken: OK. Well, in 1912 the Lawrence, Massachusetts strike was on. That was an I.W.W. [International Workers of the World] strike. Did your group discuss the I.W.W.

Kar: I don't remember.

Ken: I wondered what the attitude of the socialist was toward the I.W.W. at that time.

Kar: No, I don't remember that discussion at all.

Ken: Let's see - the World War started in Europe in 1914 and in January, 1917 -

Kar: Yes, that's what I thought because my father was still talking about it. I remember that. He had a gathering there. The people came to our porch and he spoke what the revolution would mean, if it came to a revolution - which was just a war. And he said this war could make a revolution. He was just guessing, but he spoke what it would mean then, what it would mean to the Lithuanians and all the countries. That I remember vaguely. You know I didn't understand too much, but I know he spoke on that.

Ken: When they sent for you to go to work for the socialist paper, and you told them you were eighteen, how did you get there?

Kar: By train. I had to change in New York. The first time I

Kar: travelled alone. I don't know whether I should put that in.

Ken: Go ahead. Whatever it is, put it in.

Kar: My mother finally consented to send me.

Ken: That's the next question I was going to ask you, how your mother felt.

Kar: First when I asked my mother she said "You going away from home so young" and everything. And I said, "Well, I'm going or else you know what is going to happen. I can't live here." So she says, "Ok, you go." So just before I went my mother took me to the store. She bought me a corset. For the first time in my life, a child, a corset and high heeled shoes for a trip. So I got on the train, and I had to change in New York. And here I was. [laughter] You know, I felt like I was in chains.

Ken: Did you need a brassier then?

Kar: Why certainly. She bought it.

Ken: They didn't have brassiers at that time, did they?

Kar: They had - it wasn't sticking out. It was tight. I wore a tight bodice like. They didn't have sticking out. They had tight.

Ken: Why?

Kar: I don't know, but they wore them those days.

Ken: To keep your breasts in, in other words.

Kar: I suppose, but they had to be tight. She bought me the regular corset you know - with all the staples and everything, and here I couldn't hardly walk with those shoes. I got on that train, and oh, what a misery I had, and I had to change in New York and by the time I got to Philadelphia a woman which I didn't know, one of the editor's wife was to meet me. She met me and she knew I was in misery. She ~~was~~ said, "What is the matter with you?" And she looked at me and said, "You are not eighteen". And she said, "What is the matter with you?" And I said, "Oh, I don't know. I'm tired." So she took me home, and the first thing she did - she sent me to a room and she said, "Take off that corset, you don't need it." And she

Kar: says, "Take off those shoes. I'll give you slippers." She says, "Child, did you have to wear all that?" I said, "Well, I'm supposed to be a woman." [laughter]. She looked at me, she says, "I am not going to say anything." But she says, "Don't wear these again, you don't need them."

Ken: Who was she?

Kar: She was one of the editor's wives. She was just a nice woman. That was the first time I was a woman - a real woman. [laughter] After that I hardly wore anything. I was thin in those days. Not like today.

Ken: Did your mother give you the money to travel?

Kar: Oh yes - enough money to travel. And by the way I was getting this four and a half dollars in the factory there, and they asked me how much I want to be a bookkeeper, and I said ten dollars. So they agreed, and that was a fortune. So when I came and looked at those books - I'm telling you I felt like running home because I didn't understand them all. I could follow some of the things in there, but that would be an awful lot of work to follow. So I kept thinking now I am in disgrace. I said I was a bookkeeper and I can't keep those books. And They have an auditor every six months, and this scared me to death that the auditor will see I am not a bookkeeper. So I came to a decision all on my own. I am getting ten dollars. I can live maybe on four dollars, and if I can get a bookkeeper to show me how to keep them, not to learn because I didn't have that much time. I asked this bookkeeper if he would come once a week or twice a week. I told him I don't have much money, but if he wants to make a little money if he would come and show me if I'm doing it right and show me how to go about it. And he did, and I paid him five dollars out of that ten. So I paid for three months and that's how I learned.

Ken: Did your mother expect you to send her money?

Kar: She expected. I told her. I wrote to her and told her as soon as I get the full ten dollars I will send you some. I can't now because I have to pay him five dollars to show me because I thought I was a bookkeeper, but I'm not. So after three months I was a bookkeeper. And the auditors came and found everything in order because he went through them. He fixed them for me. He was a very nice person. That's how I learned.

Ken: Now, this was a socialist paper? What relationship

Kar: did you have with the people who ran the paper?

Very good. They all like me and I liked them and we got along very nicely.

Ken: Did you attend any socialist meetings?

Kar: Yes, Immediately I joined the Young Socialist League there, which was not Lithuanian, the National league.

Ken: What about your Lithuanian -

Kar: And I belonged to the Socialist Branch in Lithuanian while I was there.

Ken: Did you belong to any women's Lithuanian groups?

Kar: Yes. I got there in 1916. At that time this Lithuanian women's organization was just organizing itself. From various cities groups to have a convention. So I was elected immediately to a convention. And they started that paper in 1916, in October, the Lithuanian Womens' paper.

Ken: Why did they have a separate Lithuanian women's group?

Kar: Why do they have one today? Their interests are different. They needed to help the suffrage movement, and the women had a lot more that they wanted to talk about. They wanted their own paper. So when they had this convention they decided to issue a paper. Women's Voice, they called it. I was immediately elected as business manager of the paper because it was going to be printed in the same place as the other paper.

Ken: The paper you worked on, you mean.

KAR: Yes. So until , that was later. In 1917 to government

Kar: closed the socialist papers, and they closed the paper I was working for, and they they closed this women's paper.

I had a lot to do with going to the government and telling them what these papers were; that this was not a socialist paper, it was a women's magazine; And finally we got our rights back.

Ken: Let's go a little slower. What was the lot you had to do with the government? How did you -

Kar: Well, I had to go to various committees, to the post office. Then they sent me to the -

End of tape

OK
SKB

Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Wednesday, August 3, 1977, at
Home of Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, CA.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin: Tape #3 - page 46 - Counter #1

Ken: There are some questions I missed in the last interview. There are always some questions you miss, and when you transcribe you wonder, why didn't I ask that question. This is one thing I wanted to know - What kind of relationship did you have with the boarders in your home? Did your mother audit you, so to speak?

Kar: She asked me to help her. I helped in preparing food, and washed the dishes. And along with my brothers, they had to help too. It was hard on her to do all this and take care of my father. In those days she had no washing machine. She would wash all their clothing by hand, and also their bedding. Whatever they had she had to do it by hand. She used to get up at four o'clock in the morning and have it done before breakfast. Around six thirty she had most of her clothing washed. And then of course in those days they had to boil them. She had to put everything in a boiler and had to boil all the white clothes. And it was hard work, and we had to help. We children were taught to help her.

Ken: Were these boarders considered part of the family?

Kar: Well, they were because she knew them long enough. They used to talk evenings about their homeland, and what they did, and how they grew up. So naturally it worked like a family. And most of them stayed for several years, or until they left for another job, or somewhere else.

Ken: Did they keep in contact with her?

Kar: Many of them did. Especially one of them. When I went to Philadelphia later on, he came to Philadelphia

Kar: and I saw him quite often. Of course he was much older than I was. There was no romantic attachment but it was friendly.

Ken: Did they take an interest in your brothers as well as in you?

Kar: No, because my brothers weren't interested in writing or talking. They had their own playground in the back and they played with other boys. And I was alone so I spent most of my time with my mother and my father. And then I loved my father so much that whatever he asked or whatever he spoke about I wanted to listen.

Ken: Now the other question was - you said when you graduated from ^{grammar} high school you got a lot of gifts. Who gave you those gifts? I mean grammar school.

Kar: Mostly the teachers. You see I went to school in Vermont where I finished my grade school. In that school they had maybe five teachers altogether. So they separated - maybe the first and second one - and the second and third - or third and fourth was another class, and so on. So I had a little book and all the students of that school had signed it. I wrote little stories. I don't have those today. I wrote stories about the place, and how they were playing, and what the children said. It used to be in the local paper. So that is why these children and the teachers got the book for me. I don't know what happened to it in all the moving we did.

Ken: How did your mother and father feel about your getting all these gifts?

Kar: They were very happy. Especially my father. He was very proud of me.

Ken: I want to go back a little bit further. Just before you left, your father passed away. Was he in the hospital at that time or did he die at home?

Kar: He died in the hospital. We lived in a town called East Arlington, Vermont. And there was no hospital there so they had to take him by train to Bennington, Vermont, where he passed away.

Ken: Did you become physically ill when he died, or was it an emotional thing?

Kar: It was emotional. I couldn't find a place to sit or stay, or do anything. It was emotional.

Ken: How did your mother -

Kar: My mother took me to a doctor and the doctor told her that she would have to send me away somewhere for a while. I couldn't be there.

Ken: Well, can you explain your rather unusual ability to cope with situations? I mean to leave home at such an early age and going to another town and having the initiative to ask for ten dollars a week when you were only getting four, and having the initiative to learn how to keep books? How can you explain this?

Kar: I don't know. I think that I was brought up that way. Ever since I was six or seven years old I picked up the English language, my mother would send me everywhere to help other people. So somehow I learned how to cope with myself too - how to speak - how to ask questions if I went to a doctor, or if I went somewhere else as an interpreter. I think that would probably be it. And I think from that I learned how to just go ahead.

Ken: I see. Your mother actually was interested then in helping other people.

Kar: Yes, she was very much so. She herself, if somebody was ill, neighbors or friends, especially friends of our nationality, she used to bake something. As poor as we were she would bake something and take it over to them and go and see them, and so on. And she used to tell me to run over and see how she is, or he is.

Ken: Did your father feel the same way?

Kar: Why naturally. I never heard them speak differently to each other.

Ken: How did you feel about the older people in the town that you left - the Lithuanian people? Did you know much about them outside of your boarders?

Kar: No. I didn't know too much about them, no. In those days I wasn't too interested. Maybe I would be now.

Ken: When you left home, you said the editor's wife took you home, and took off your corsets. How long did you stay with them?

Kar: I stayed with them several months. They didn't have much room where they lived. And I went out to live with another married couple. I lived with them - had a room there. I boarded in other words.

Ken: Did you ever get homesick?

Kar: Naturally I did. After a while I began to feel that I shouldn't have left, and that my mother was having a hard time. She did. And I felt very bad about it, but I liked where I was, and I wanted to learn more, and to just continue learning.

Ken: How did you keep in touch with your family?

Kar: By writing. Then once a year after I got there I went to visit. And then in 1918 when I got married they were all sick with the flu-

Ken: The epidemic?

Ka: Yes. Then my mother came with my younger brother to help me. And when she got there she wasn't sick, but my younger brother got sick. So we all were laying there.

~~Ken~~: At that time she already lived in Massachusetts. She left Vermont.

Ken: She hadn't remarried by then?

Kar: Not yet.

Ken: When you moved to this other family's house, what arrangements did you have with them?

Kar: She made my meals and she did all the washing. And I paid her so much. I forgot what it was - four dollars or something a week.

Ken: How did you manage your finances?

Kar: I didn't have very much in those days [laughter]. This same woman I moved to, she was very nice and she ~~often~~ made me a couple of dresses. In those days the material was very cheap, and she didn't charge me anything for making. So I had clothes and I didn't need much more.

Ken: What was their attitude towards you?

Kar: She was more like a motherly attitude. She knew I was alone and lonesome. So she used to take care of me. And she had a child, and when they went out naturally I was baby sitting.

Ken: Did she try to control you in any way?

Kar: No. She was a very understanding woman. She didn't ask questions. If I asked questions she answered. If I didn't she never butted in on anything I did. They were a very nice couple.

Ken: What did you do?

Kar: On Sundays I went to Lithuanian picnics because I worked on a Lithuanian paper. We had gatherings at Philadelphia park so it was very easy for me (I forgot what the fare was) to go down to the park and stay all day. That was the main attraction at that time.

Ken: Who were your new friends?

Kar: Those that were reading the paper came around to the office and bought their paper there, or pamphlets, or whatever we had at the time. So I got acquainted with them. Then I joined these organizations. I knew a lot of people. And in 1917 I got very popular because most of these Lithuanian young men wanted to get released from going into the war and they came to fill out the papers. Certain ones that came just prior to the war were given class five which was exemption from war. So I filled hundreds and hundreds of papers for them. They used to come in droves after their working hours to the paper to ask me to fill out their papers for them. I never took a penny from them because I knew that they were not very rich. They didn't have hardly anything, and they were scared. So many a time later when they would see me at a picnic or something they used to treat me [laughter] because I was good to them.

Ken: What did you do at the paper besides bookkeeping?

Kar: Bookkeeping was the main - and when somebody came in I waited on them. They came to the office to buy a book or subscribe to the paper. In fact I was in charge of the office. We had a manger who went in and out because he had to take care of the press and whatever was needed. But I took care of the office.

Ken: I was wondering, because you had written things before, why you hadn't written anything for the paper.

Kar: I had written. If we went to a picnic I usually wrote ^{but} what happened at the picnic, and little articles the paper printed. You know, a daily column.

Ken: Were you a society editor [laughter] or did you write other things?

Kar: I certainly wouldn't call it society editor, I was just a correspondent. In Lithuanian it was called a dorrespondent.

Ken: Did the men ^{en}courage you to.

Kar: Yes they did. They encouraged me. Especially one editor who came recently from Lithuania. And he was a well known writer and political activist in Lithuania. He asked me to write more, and he encouraged me what to write - especially on the womens' movement, what I thought it should be, and in those days how women were oppressed here, with no voice, no vote. And he asked me to write about it - how I felt about it. So I began to write some articles for the paper.

Ken: How did you feel about it then?

Kar: Well, naturally I felt that he was right in asking me, and I had the feeling that the women were oppressed. And I wrote what I could. Some of them he corrected, and others he told me that I should change and what I should write. So I began to write, and I wrote quite a few articles for this paper and also for other Lithuanian papers after that.

Ken: How did you learn more about the womens' movement?

Kar: Well I belonged to organizations. I joined various movements like demonstrations. And I saw later on many demonstrations for women's vote, and the suffragettes as we called them. And I joined their group - not officially but I joined their movement. When they went to a demonstration, when they held meetings, and so on. I learned quite a bit from them. And I felt they were right. Though they were ridiculed and some of them were beaten and some of them were jailed, I felt very much for them, and I believed in that movement.

Ken: Were you involved in many demonstrations?

Kar: I joined many demonstrations at the time. I distributed leaflets, but I wasn't officially a member of any group.

Ken: How did you get involved in the Young Socialist League?

Kar: I was asked by a group member who I met at one of the demonstrations, and he asked me if I belonged and I said no.

Ken: What demonstration?

Kar: At that time I think it was some kind of a picnic and a demonstrations of some kind. I don't remember what it was. There was a group of young people and one of them came up and asked me if I wouldn't mind joining their organization since I was working for a Socialist paper. And that's how I joined.

Ken: Did you join the Socialist Party there too?

Kar: I was already a member of the Socialist Party, of the Lithuanian group.

Ken: Did you transfer?

Kar: No. I belonged to both. I was a member of the Lithuanian and I never gave that up. However, I joined the Young Socialist League.

Ken: Where did you spend most of your time?

Kar: Most of my time was with the Lithuanian group. I just went to the meetings of the Young Socialist League.

Ken: I see. In other words you spent more time with the adult group than with your own peer group.

Kar: Yes. That's right.

Ken: Why was that?

Kar: Well it was easier for me because I worked for the paper and I was already writing. From our discussions and from whatever work we took up, I had to report on it. So naturally it was easier for me. I worked more with them.

Ken: I see. Didn't this limit your social life considerably?

Kar: I don't think so. I think I happily worked with one and then whenever I could I stayed with the other. I think it broadened my view.

Ken: Did this friend at the paper lead you into doing any reading?

Kar: Naturally he explained what books I should read and

Kar: various political books so I would know how the world is oriented politically. Especially he wanted me to read about the revolution of nineteen hundred and five and what it meant. He was still there when the nineteen seventeen revolution occurred.

Ken: In Lithuania?

Kar: No, at the paper. He left for Lithuania after that. But before that he was still working with the paper. He wanted me to understand the difference - why it was aborted in 1905 - the revolution was an aborted one - and when it came to 1917 the people really were victorious over the Czar. Many of the books he asked me to read - first I had to read Lithuanian books because he couldn't advise me which books in English. He didn't know the English language. So I had to pick up Lithuanian books. Then as I went to the Young Socialist League, they were also reading various books, and they asked me to read others, and that's how I got to be interested politically.

Ken: What kinds of discussions did you have after the meetings?

Kar: Usually the discussion was on current events. Now among the Lithuanians we even had our own newspaper, and I was an editor of it because many of those people could not read English. I am speaking of how we had an oral newspaper. The people at the Lithuanian meeting decided they could only get news from the English papers because the Lithuanian papers could not get the news immediately. By the time it is printed it is about a week old. And they were very much interested in what was going on, especially in Europe after the revolution. And they thought it would be very wise if we could have an oral newspaper. So I was instructed to prepare this oral newspaper. So one had to be a chief editor, and somebody else had to be local news, and somebody else some other kinds of news. So we had that for quite a while and it was very educational because we had to prepare ourselves for what went on this week.

Kar: How the revolution was turning, and in America what they think of it, and so on. And it was a very interesting time and I think I learned how to speak there and how to go forward with the people.

Ken: What other kinds of activities took place?

Kar: I also was a member of a chorus.

Ken: What I meant was what did the Socialists or the Young Socialists do outside of the meetings?

Kar: They prepared May Day celebrations, holidays. They prepared demonstrations. They urged everybody to come. There were leaflets for distribution. There was a discussion of what they should have, and all that. As I said, my main work was not with them. It was with the Lithuanian group.

Ken: Let's see - did the Socialists participate in the suffrage movement as a group or -

Kar: No.

Ken: Was there a policy?

Kar: No there was no policy. However the socialist movement was always sympathetic and they urged people to go and demonstrate and do whatever they want to to help.

Ken: You mentioned that you had bought some two hundred Margaret Sanger birth control books and given them out. Was it during this period you did that?

Kar: Yes. I was still not married. It was just before my marriage. I gave it to some of the Lithuanian people and to some of the others who had big families and suffered - who couldn't educate them. So my thought was if I can help by distributing that pamphlet I will do it.

Ken: How did you get in touch with the Sanger group?

Kar: I heard through some newspaper or other. I don't know exactly. I couldn't answer that. But I found out her address. And then there was another friend of mine from New York who knew her personally I later found out. She said, "Why don't you send for some of these books and distribute them among your friends?" So I did. I sent for the books and gave it to them. Of course in those days if I was caught I would be put in jail by the government because it was taboo.

Ken: Was there a birth control center in Philadelphia?

Kar: No. Not ~~sex~~ in those days. No, there was no birth control center. That was forbidden. She was arrested.

Ken: I was just asking because she did have clinics in certain places.

Kar: Not that I know of.

Ken: How did the women get their birth control apparatus?

Kar: Her apparatus was simple. That's what the book showed. They were able to get it.

Ken: Did you continue to go to church?

Kar: No.

Kam: You did go to church in East ^{Arlington}hampton.

Kar: I had to until my father passed away, and after that my mother didn't go either.

Ken: You didn't go because your mother didn't go?

Kar: No, I didn't go because I didn't want to. My mother was the one that was pushing us to go.

Ken: How did you relate to people outside of the Lithuanian community in Philadelphia? What people did you see?

Kar: Not too many except those I got connected with through the Young Socialist League. Not too many. It was mostly the Lithuanian colony. We were segregated from the rest, like a Lithuanian colony there, around this newspaper and around certain areas. All the Lithuanians were living together.

Ken: Were they all socialists?

Kar: No. There were church goers, there were some that were socialists and there were some that just were, I would say drunkards. There were all kinds of people.

Ken: Why a separate community?

Kar: Each had to lean on the other. They didn't know the language. They worked in the same places. One would get a job from the other. His brother would come or his sister would come from the old country and they would get them a job where they were working. It was a colony. It was not only Lithuanians. It was Poles and other people too.

Ken: I see. How did you get involved in the Lithuanian Women's organization?

Kar: When I was involved in the paper - the Lithuanian

Kar: Women's Organization had also branches in other cities, so when I joined the Socialist Branch I joined the women's branch. And the women in these branches had a central committee, and whenever they had a pamphlet or something they sent it to all the branches; and they would have conventions ~~xxxxxx~~ every two years or so. In the convention of 1916- when I first got there I went to that convention.

Ken: Why did they elect you?

Kar: They elected three or four of us and since I was working at the paper they knew me. So at the convention we decided to issue a women's paper. So we started it - that fall, in October, the first issue came out. And I was elected to be its manager.

Ken: What was the job of manager.

Kar: To see that we had proper circulation. Mailed them to various cities and towns where we had the branches, and collect the funds, report on them, and so on.

Ken: Who did the writing for the paper?

Kar: Various women from these various branches contributed, and we had some older women who were in the movement longer, the suffrage movement, the socialist movement, various organizational movements, and they all wrote for that paper. In the beginning the editor who came from Europe, he did some writing for that women's paper too.

Ken: Then this women's paper was not a socialist paper.

Kar: No. It was a progressive paper, but not a socialist paper. The organization was called the Women's Progressive Alliance.

End of side one

Begin Side two - counter #1

Kar: At one time we had as much as six thousand members throughout the country.

Ken: How many in Philadelphia?

Kar: We had two or three branches. In Philadelphia alone we must have had two or three hundred.

Ken: And the paper was put out by all three branches?

Kar: It was put out for all the U.S.A. branches.

Ken: Oh, I see, it was national, but centered in Philadelphia. Did you write for it at all?

Kar: Yes, I did - quite a few articles. I started writing on May Day, on various women's movements.

Ken: What kind of jobs did the women have that belonged to this group?

Kar: Various jobs because they lived in various parts of the country. Some of them that were from Massachusetts, they were from textile; or from shoe factories; New Jersey the same; some that lived in Boston, they were garment workers. In Chicago, I don't know exactly what they were doing, but they were in some factories, and so on.

Ken: Then most of them were working women.

Kar: There were a few that were professionals - a doctor - women that were well educated, and they wrote a few articles. The editor was a garment worker in New York - Petrick.

Ken: What about the Lithuanian Literary Society?

Kar: I belonged to that to?

Ken: So many organizations!

Kar: They published books, and had a journal issued every three months. And its main function was to publish books. The dues went into a fund and from that fund they were able to publish books that nobody else could publish. We published various books that people would be interested in. We published one or two books a year out of the dues, and the dues were very cheap. Those days I think they were something like fifty cents or seventy five cents a ^{year} month for each member. Now, even today, we pay only two dollars a year. It still exists. I am still a member.

Ken: The Society itself didn't take any of your time to function in it, in other words?

Kar: We occasionally had meetings. Now we function even more in it than we did in those days. We met and took up a few functions and then we decided maybe to have an affair or something, and that was about all. Today it is more so because those remaining - we don't have as big an organization as we did at that time. Of course

Kar: the young people have their own groups, English speaking. They don't come with us any more. When we were young we didn't know enough to stick with the English. However we still have books. We are not publishing here, but we get them from other publishers. We distribute to members. And all our functions today are through that organization mainly, among Lithuanians.

Ken: Let's get back to the paper. How old were the women besides you in the women's paper.

Kar: There were fewer my age. I would say women in their thirties or something like that. They had come before the war, in 1912, 1913, when many had migrated because during the war they couldn't come here.

Ken: Was this paper in English or Lithuanian.

Kar: Lithuanian. So these people were the young married. They were older than I was at the time but they were pretty young women.

Ken: Did you ever write in English at all during that period?

Kar: Not much during that period.

Ken: How much English did you speak during that period?

Kar: Well, I spoke when I went to the meetings, or to the mass meetings we had at various places. And then naturally I had to read the papers to prepare the oral paper at that time. The oral report had to be in Lithuanian.

Ken: I just wondered how bi-lingual you were during that period.

Kar: In 1917, during the war, I guess you know that the law required that all newspapers translate political articles. They had to be sent to the post office before they accepted the newspaper for second class mailing privilege. So I had to do translations of articles at that time.

Ken: When the U.S. got involved in 1917, how did you react to this?

Kar: We were against it because we felt at that time that war was not justified; that during a certain period,

Kar: as you know, they tried to crush the Russian revolution. So most of the Lithuanians that had hardship and had lived under the Czar, naturally they were very glad the revolution had occurred. And the war was not a popular war with the people, the 1917 war.

Ken: How did the papers get closed down?

Kar: Because they felt that they were going too much against the war.

Ken: What did they do to close the paper down?

Kar: They just took away the mailing privilege and they arrested one of the editors for an article that he had written against the war, and also the manager. And we tried to get the privileges back. They also closed the women's paper. And the women's paper, however, regained their privilege because it was not a socialist paper. It was just a women's organization paper. So that regained the privileges. the others did not.

Ken: I see. Did they lock up the doors, or -

Kar: No. We weren't allowed to print the paper, period.

~~Ken:~~ And our doors were open for that other paper, plus we - As you know the printing presses were open. We printed leaflets or whatever people wanted.

Ken: I see. So you never did lose your job. I got the impression that you lost your job.

Kar: No, I stayed on as office manager.

Ken: When the women's paper was started again - you said you had gone to various places to get it started. How did you go about getting it re-opened?

Kar: We had to go to the post office, and go to the various government officials.

Ken: Who is we?

Kar: I had a committee with me. I didn't want to go alone so we got a committee from those that were close to the paper and we went to these various places and tried to get it re-established. We had to tell them that the paper was not a socialist, that it was a women's organization paper, and that all translations were made that were necessary, and that

Kar: it was illegally closed. After studying that the government allowed it to go on. We lost about two months.

Ken: What restrictions were placed on the paper after it was started?

Kar: There were none. The government restrictions were followed, which we did in the beginning. But, see, when they closed the other they closed the whole thing. At that time they didn't distinguish these papers. There was a journal issued there and they closed that. That never regained its privileges. But the magazine did.

Ken: You were able to stay on? There was enough money for you to get a salary?

Kar: We had other printing jobs that we were doing in the printing shop, and the wages were nothing.

Ken: I see. Well we went into your marriage just a little bit. I want to ask a few more personal questions.

Kar: What attracted you to your husband? When you first met him, did you know you were going to marry him?

No, not exactly. He was one of those that I had filled out a paper for. He was working in the railroad and of course he got classified very easily because he was needed. He was a machinist. During that period we went out to picnics several times and so on. You know how it is. We just fell in love.

Ken: What qualities did he have that you admired?

Kar: He was very friendly, sympathetic to my work, and sympathetic to the women's organization. So I felt a man like that-^{we} would be able to work together - that he wouldn't be against women's things, saying I am going out and doing work, which he never did. I didn't make a mistake.

Ken: They say that women usually marry men, if they admired their father, that reminded them of their father -

Kar: No way at all.

Ken: How many other men did you go out with before you married?

Kar: None. Now and then I went to a picnic maybe, came home, and then some other time with somebody else, but I

Kar: had no steady. I got married - my birthday was May 30th and I got married on July 4th. I was just seventeen.

Ken: Did you have any special girl friends during that period?

Kar: Yes. I had lot of them. We used to go to the singing group, and then we had plays. We performed plays. We put up various plays and -

Ken: What did you talk about with your girl friends?

Kar: In those days we talked mostly politics. In those days we were all boiled up [laughter].

Ken: When you got pregnant, did you have a difficult pregnancy?

Kar: No. I don't think so. I think it was because I was scared. You know I lost my first baby during the Palmer raids.

Ken: That's what I wanted to know, if you were ill before that or if it was the Palmer raids.

Kar: I think it's because of the Palmer raids that I lost the baby. Naturally being in jail I was scared.

Ken: How did you get arrested?

Kar: At home.

Ken: When you married your husband you moved out of the place where you were living?

Kar: We had our own place - rented rooms.

Ken: You still rented rooms in homes of other people?

Kar: We had several rooms with kitchen privileges.

Ken: They didn't have apartment houses or flats?

Kar: They did. Later on when our daughter was born before we moved to Massachusetts we lived in an apartment.

Ken: So they came to your home -

Kar: They came to our home at midnight and they arrested both of us. He had a job which he was afraid to lose. We were pretty scared those days, you know. A job means everything to a person. Of course mine was different. At that time we were just about ready to move the whole printing shop to Chicago. So mine wasn't important. Anyway I was going to work just a short time more and quit the job because I was

Kar: expecting a baby. And when they arrested us that night it was a scary thing. They came in the middle of the night in a couple of wagons. And the police came in (they were F.B.I. men rather) and they picked all the books from the bookshelves, threw them in a bag, and papers, and anything they found. They went through all the drawers, and all kinds of papers they scooped up - my private letters and papers and whatever I had in the house, ~~they put in those bags~~ ^{They took everything,} and took away, and then they took us in the paddy wagon and took us out. Naturally I was scared.

Ken: Were there other people in the paddy wagons too?

Kar: There were others, sure. They arrested quite a few that night throughout Philadelphia, the Lithuanian groups and many others. That night was the night - and the next morning I lost my baby. I had a hard time because I didn't what it was or what's happening. I was very, very ill.

Ken: Were there any other women in jail with you?

Kar: Not political women, no. I was the only political woman arrested by Palmer's group.

Ken: Oh, really.

Kar: That night I mean, and in that jail. There were other jails. There were other women arrested that night, but I was the only one in that particular jail. There were a lot of prostitute women there and other women arrested for some small trivial things. So when I was arrested and got there they pushed me so hard that I fell on the floor. Finally these women all ran to me and they helped me on the bed. They noticed that I was pregnant, and they told me to "lay down, lay down." And they were very, very good to me. If it hadn't been for them I don't know what would have happened. So finally my water broke, and you know I was all wet. These women gave whatever they had, clothing, to put under me. They tried to get the woman, the jailer, to come. They hollered for her, but she wouldn't come. She told them to shut up because they were making a racket all the time. I heard it myself, "Now shut up or

Kar: I'll call the men police, and they'll restrain you. What's the matter with you." and they kept hollering "There's a woman is dying here." And they wouldn't pay attention until morning. I was there from midnight until four or five o'clock suffering. So finally in the morning the police came and they immediately called an ambulance and took me to a hospital. So that's the story.

Ken: The baby would have been premature?

Kar: It died. It was dead. I guess because of the pushing around, and then I fell on the floor, and all that.

Ken: Did they take you back to jail after that?

Kar: Yes. The people we rented from, they came and gave bail.

Ken: They took you back to jail after you lost your baby?

Kar: Yes. I stayed there one day and then they took me back to jail. And I stayed two more days. I didn't stay very long. My husband stayed over a week.

Ken: Did you get any medical care in the jail?

Kar: They gave me something or other. I don't even know what.

Ken: How did they treat you at the hospital?

Kar: They treated me very nicely. They did everything they could. They told me how to take care of myself.

Ken: Did you have any recourse?

Kar: How could you - no.

Ken: I didn't think so.

Kar: I heard afterwards there were many women who were pregnant who lost their babies, and others who didn't, but had to live through all that. There were many women arrested - not in Philadelphia alone, but throughout the country.

My husband didn't have his citizenship papers yet. You can't get them that soon. I was a citizen because my father already had his papers. We weren't of age, so we were considered as American citizens. But because I married a foreigner I was a foreigner. And there was a question of deportation of all these arrested. So the lawyer had a hard time. There was a defense organization formed and the lawyer fought for quite a while that if there was going to be

Kar: deportation that I should not be deported because I was already a citizen. However, when I married, I lost my citizenship, so I shouldn't be deported. So they wrangled over that for about six months before they said OK that I should stay. Later on they let my husband stay too. They deported quite a group you know, especially anarchists. They deported many of the anarchists.

Ken: Did you go to any schools during that period?

Kar: No. I had no time - no chance.

Ken: Why didn't you? You had always wanted to go to high school Why didn't you, when you went to Philadelphia, after you had been working, continue on to get a high school education?

Kar: I always had in my mind I will. I was so taken up with all kinds of work that somehow I thought that this was first.

Ken: What about your artistic interests?

Kar: That I wanted more than anything else. I never got a chance at that either. I wanted very badly, Even when we came to California I had an idea that probably I would get around to something like that - make pictures. I could put them together, so I thought if I can put them together I can probably paint too. But it all petered out. I was always busy. Somehow I always felt I have to do this first. And that's it.

Ken: After you got married, did your social life change in any way?

Kar: No. We went together. After the baby was born we would take her in our arms and off we would go. And to meetings too. She didn't even interfere with our meetings. We used to take her to the meetings and put her somewhere on a chair and she was quiet. She must have been about eight months old when we went to Massachusetts.

Ken: Did you continue to work.

Kar: No. I didn't work until we went to Massachusetts.

~~Ken:~~ I decided well, that my mother was living in Massachusetts and that it would be much healthier

Kar: to bring up the baby there because my mother had a cow, and she had chickens and she didn't have a farm, but a big place. And I thought that would be better. And I talked to my husband and he quit his job and went to work in textile.

Ken: So you moved then to what part of Massachusetts?

Kar: Easthampton, Massachusetts.

Ken: Where did you live in Vermont? I thought that was Easthampton.

Kar: East Arlington.

Ken: Was your mother remarried then?

Kar: Yes, my mother was remarried. A year after I left. Not quite a year after I left she remarried.

Ken: Did you keep sending her money after she remarried?

Kar: No. I had send her money whenever I could - a few dollars.

Ken: What was it like in East^{Arlington}hampton?

Kar: It was a nice town. It had about five textile mills of different kinds. One was quite a good sized one. There had been at one time several thousand working in that mill. The people were very friendly. It was a nice town.

Ken: Was there a Lithuanian community there?

Kar: Very small. It was more of an English community.

Ken: Did you live with your mother?

Kar: No. We got our own. We started buying a home for the first time.

Ken: Did you decide to go to work there then?

Kar: Yes I went to work immediately. My mother was taking care of the baby so I went to work.

Ken: Why did you decide to go into textile work instead of being a bookkeeper like you were trained?

Kar: I couldn't get a job there as a bookkeeper. I had to work in textile. In a way I even wanted to. A bookkeeping job outside of what I was doing would have been -

Ken: How did you get your first job in textile?

Kar: That was easy. I just went and applied for work, and I got it.

Ken: What mill was it?

Kar: That was the Hampton mills. And I worked there awhile.

Kar: And I worked in another, the West Boyleston Mill.

Ken: What were conditions like in the mills?

Kar: Oh, very bad in those days, very bad.

Ken: What did you do, tend a loom?

Kar: No. The first job I got was a job working on spools. You have to tie up the breaks. You have a row of spools. I worked on that job. Then I got various jobs. Finally I did graduate. The boss wanted me to keep books for him, where the work comes in. How big the rolls of cloth were, what they weigh. You had to figure that out. They called it booking. I used to do that.

Ken: How many women were in the plant?

Kar: Mostly women. The men worked on the harder jobs, like on the big looms. They had great big looks for tire fabric and tent fabric and things like that. So the men worked on those looms. But everything else was women. There were very few men.

My husband worked there a short while and finally got a job meat packing.

Ken: You were going to tell me more about the conditions.

Kar: Conditions were very bad at the time I was there.

The women worked until the last minute of pregnancy.

A And one of the women there even had a baby at the machine. By the time help came her baby was there. There were no restrictions of any kind. The dust in the mills - Now I understand (I visited some of the mills where they have suction to pull out the dust) - the dust was all over. And many of the younger girls had T.B. [tuberculosis] from the dust. The conditions were very bad there. That was in nineteen twenty-one, twenty-two.

Ken: How many hours did you work?

Kar: The hours at the time I started were forty eight hours, six days. We had to work Saturday full time. Later on they made it half a day Saturday, and they distributed the hours over the other days.

Ken: I see - still forty eight hours. Did the employers make any promises to you as to what they would do for you?

Kar: No.

Ken: Was there much turnover?

Kar: Yes. Especially among the younger women. The older women had to stick with it because it was all they knew and all they could do. But the younger girls, they got married. Some left. Others got better jobs somewhere else in another town.

Ken: Where did the women come from who worked in the mills?

Kar: They lived there.

Ken: Was it a company town to the extent they had company stores?

Kar: It was a company town. They had company houses, but some of them were non company. They had certain plots where they had their own housing and they had to buy from those stores or they were angry. It wasn't exactly their stores, but it was their person who had these stores, and you had to buy there.

Ken: Did they still have a policy of running boarding houses?

Kar: They had some boarding houses because they had some single people there.

End of tape

OK
SKB

Labor Women series
California Historical Society

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Wednesday, August 3, 1977, at
home of Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin: Tape #4 - page 69 - counter #1

Ken: I ~~was~~ going to ask you how much you got paid.

Kar: When I started I got paid fourteen dollars and some cents. I don't remember exactly.

Ken: For spooling? And when you did this booking, did you also do spooling?

Kar: No, I worked and I used to go and work on the sewing machines. I could run a power machine, so I also worked on the sewing machine.

Ken: How did you learn how to run a power machine?

Kar: Just fooling around with it, I think. [laughter]
When I had a little time I would go and work on it because I didn't want to fool around doing nothing or they would put me somewhere else. So the girls that were working on the power machines, there was always an extra machine, so I used to repair and this and that, and I learned how.

Ken: Were there children in the mills then?

Kar: At that time there were very young girls but there were no children. Not in that period. In much earlier years, there were children at that time. At that time they had to be sixteen and go half a day to school.

I'll tell you what they did though. At one of the mills there (they were finally caught when I was there, and the practice was stopped) the fathers who worked on elastic, rubber elastic, they used to bring the children, and the children were not workers. They were just visitors. The father would bring it in and he would have the child pull the threads or whatever was needed and do a lot of work. And all

Kar: day these children sat there helping the father. And if anyone came, the inspectors, well these children came in with a bucket. They brought in their lunch. But the children did work in that manner during that period when I was there, in nineteen twenty-one, twenty-two.

Ken: About the conditions - what was talked about among the girls at lunch?

Kar: Well, actually they were all wishing to, those that were young girls, get married and get out of it. And the older ones were wishing that there was a union. And they heard that such and such a town got better conditions where there were unions. And they used to talk an awful lot about unions. They were very much interested in having the union come. And then when finally the union did come we went out distributing leaflets at night. We were scared. Because they thought if they find we have a leaflet the boss will fire them, and that was in about nineteen twenty-five. The United Textile came in and organized us. I was responsible in asking them to come.

Ken: Before we get into the union I want to ask you one more question. I read a book about the mills and it mentioned mill marriages, people who lived together and never got married.

Kar: No, I don't know that.

Ken: It must have been an earlier period. OK, how were you responsible for an AFL organizer coming in?

Kar: Through a connection. I was still writing for that women's magazine and for some of the Lithuanian papers and I had connections with various unions that way. So I heard that they were sending an organizer to Massachusetts so I wrote to them and asked them if they wouldn't come and look around and see what they could do in East ^{Arlington} ~~Ampton~~. An organizer came. In fact I put him up in our house. I can't think of his name right now. He came and he got a bunch of leaflets. He wrote about the conditions, that they could be improved, and so on. So at night time we went around to various houses and he stuck them in

Kar: doors. And when we saw people coming we made believe we were walking. We had to be very careful so they wouldn't see who it is. The next morning they found these leaflets and the boss had a bunch of them in his hand. He got the people together and was telling them that if - they will close the factory down and they will cut the wages, and scared the people. But the women who were there, the older women who heard a lot about the strikes, they were not scared. It was the younger people that were scared.

Ken: Why?

Kar: Because they were getting ready to get married, or they were going out and needed clothing, and they were afraid. But the older women were not afraid somehow. And that was a very strange thing to me because the older women said, "We'll stick. We'll stick. If the union wants us, we'll stick." So they finally started a union, and they had a strike. But it was so strange, like I spoke that time at the meeting* that the young women couldn't do anything.

In those days you had to have half a dozen unions, and these half a dozen would have to strike together. Or else if they would strike separately you can't win. They had a loom fixers union, which was one union; then they had a machinists union which was another union. I forgot what the other one was called. Then the worst to organize was the major part of the workers which were the unskilled. And there you are, when the unskilled went on strike these others wouldn't go. So they lost the strike. Finally we started organizing again. The first strike was lost. They stayed out about a month.

Ken: How was the strike conducted?

Kar: They had a meeting or two in the square. And the speakers (none of us dared to get up and urge to hold together or anything. If we did we would be out)

*Referred to the fact that Mrs. Kaross spoke at a meeting of union women which interviewer attended. Her companion speaker was a current union organizer from the East in S.F. to organize a boycott on J. Stevens Company.

Kar: But this speaker from New York got another speaker and these two were the ones that showed themselves out in front. So naturally the boss said, "See, they will get all your money. They will run away. That isn't the local people. Local people don't want the strike." They scared in every way they can. So the strike was lost. The strikers went back with nothing.

Then they had another strike ~~which was~~^{after} about three or four months, or something like that.

Ken: How did you go about quietly organizing?

Kar: You know a person who talks in the factory, "well it would be good"[a union], well you go to the house, and you become friendly with them, become friends.

Ken: How many people besides you did this?

Kar: About three of us. That's all in that whole town. Along with the organizers who used to give us leaflets and help us, send them in, and explain things in the leaflet. Because where would we print them. They had to bring them in.

During the second strike -

Ken: I want to ask - did they sign up? [in the union]

Kar: In the second they did. In the first strike they didn't. It was a strike that they agreed to, but they wouldn't sign anything. They were afraid. Well, the second strike they were mad. The people that were for the strike and for the union, they got very angry because they lost the first. And they decided, and ~~they~~ they told these other groups like loom fixers and machinists to help them if they want to get more money because they won't get more if we were down. That is what we had to tell them. So we did and they agreed that they were going to support our strike.

Ken: What did you ask for?

Kar: It was mainly shorter hours - a forty hour week - although we got forty-four. We didn't get forty. And then we wanted something like five cents an hour increase, which was a great big sum of money. Finally, during that second strike, the bosses did make an offer. They made an

Kar: offer that they will give us two and a half cents an hour. And of course they all grabbed that. It was better than nothing. As far as the hours, they were going to see about it. They didn't refuse and they didn't agree. So that was the second strike we had. And the union was very weak. The people that signed up finally didn't want to pay any dues because they didn't get enough even to pay dues, hardly. And they were dropping out.

It was another year before we had another strike. And that must have been nineteen twenty five, I think.

Ken: How did the union get organized there? I mean, what did you do about it? Did meetings take place, etc?

Kar: The meetings were all secret, secret meetings, because we had a small portion at one house, and another portion of people at another house. Because it was a small town and we all knew each other. And it was very hard. And finally I didn't even dare to bring in the organizer to my house because I was being watched. They certainly knew that there was a stranger living there. So he boarded in the town - came out from another town close by. And that's how we were organizing.

Ken: Once you were organized and won the first strike, did the union meet openly?

Kar: Oh yes. They had a hall, and we met in the hall. From then on the organization would be here so it took about a year to get a majority organized in that particular factory. And when we had the majority organized we were able to pull a good strike. Then they got their five cents and they got a lot of conditions.

Ken: In the third strike, how long were you out?

Kar: It was only a week. It was a short strike. The bosses saw that they couldn't get away with it, and the people won.

Ken: Did the town support you?

Kar: Well, in a way they did, and in a way they were scared to. Because after all they depended on these people

Kar: buying, the storekeepers and so on; and the officials of the town naturally stuck with the bosses,

But after that I was not a booker any more. I had to go and work on the machine. I lost my job [laughter].

Ken: I was going to ask you, the AFL didn't have a policy of organizing unskilled worker too much, did they?

Kar: No, they didn't at all. The union didn't give us much support. "You want to organize - go ahead." That was the policy. "But not that I'm going to help you."

Ken: How did you get your charter?

Kar: We got a charter through United Textile, or course. The organization, United Textile, as such, wanted an organization because they were all unskilled in that group. You see all these machinists and loom fixers and weavers all had their own unions. So those were the big organizations of AFL right there - the skilled workers. But United Textile was just beginning in these various small towns to organize the general workers.

Ken: How do you explain the difference between your strike and Lawrence, Passaic and these other strike where really all hell broke loose in the towns.

Kar: I'll tell you. They did over there differently because these people like Haywood [Bill Haywood]*and all these speakers. You don't find in a small town anybody like that. The others, they went to these big places like Lawrence where hundreds and hundreds of people were working. Here we had all told maybe three thousand working in a small town. So that is why they had better success. But finally we got the United Textile to recognize us -

Ken: I want to ask one more question. Was this just in one mill, or was it in all the mills?

Kar: The third strike was in all the mills. Four mills went out. All the people went out. Naturally when such a big group went out the bosses could do nothing.

Ken: Did you have picket lines.

Kar: No. We didn't need picket lines. They didn't open them. So there were no picket lines except meetings and meetings with the bosses.

Ken: Who negotiated with the bosses?

Kar: Well, there were two from the United Textile and I went with them. That's why I didn't get the job.

Ken: Why did you go with them?

Kar: Because it was my duty. I asked the people to organize. I spoke Polish (they were mostly Polish people). There were very few Lithuanians there, all Poles. And I knew Polish from childhood. So I spoke Polish and I could talk to these women. And they considered me friend, they listened to me. So they urged me to go. They wanted me to go. So I went.

Ken: How did your husband feel about your going?

Kar: OK. He didn't mind. At that time he wasn't working in the mill any more. He got a job at the meat packers?

Ken: What was the attitude of the bosses toward you?

Kar: When I got back - I told you -

Ken: I mean when you were negotiating, what part did you take?

Kar: They ignored me. [laughter] They completely ignored me. They talked to these United Textile Workers officials but they would not talk to me. I tried to say something, they just completely ignored me. I didn't mean anything.

Ken: Why do you think this was?

Kar: I think they wanted to show that I had no business there.

Ken: What was the attitude of the Textile Workers' representatives?

Kar: They would ask me questions, and that irked the bosses even more because they would say, "You know about that, don't you?" - whatever the question was, and I answered it. But when I asked them or told them, they wouldn't pay any attention.

Ken: How did the textile officials feel about a woman participating in negotiations with them?

Kar: They felt all right. They already were broken into that by other strikes. There was a majority of women in the textile. If it was any other industry, probably not. Later on I can tell you I had trouble here because I was a woman, when I came to California. Over there I did not.

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Ken: Did you know Ann Burlak?

Kar: Yes, I did.

Ken: How did you get to meet her?

Kar: I met her at one of the meetings in New York. We had a meeting of - After our strike was over I was called to New York to a conference. And I met her there.

Ken: What did you think of her?

Kar: I thought she was a capable organizer. She was a good talker, very brilliant. To me it seemed in those days she was very brilliant.

Ken: What other women did you know in that period?

Kar: At that time in the labor movement I knew others, but in Textile at that time I didn't meet very many.

Ken: What happened at this meeting in New York?

Kar: It was a union meeting, a Textile Union meeting, and they spoke of various places they should organize. They passed some resolutions. A usual convention.

Ken: Did the AFL ask you, or were you sent from your local?

Kar: I was sent from my local.

Ken: Were you an official in your local?

Kar: Yes. I was the chairman, chairperson. A chairperson and a secretary, they had. That was all.

Ken: How did the union function?

Kar: It didn't function too well because most of the women couldn't speak enough English. They couldn't get up and face the public in speaking. And it was pretty poor functioning. But it lasted until we left, I guess. And then it broke down completely because the factories began moving out. They moved the big factories out of there down south to Alabama or somewhere. Naturally the people were scared that all of them would move. And the town became a dead town.

Ken: When the union was going, as chairman what was your job?

Kar: The job to see that we held meetings occasionally. I don't think we had a meeting every two months or something. It was a poor functioning union. There was

Kar: nobody there lively enough to take hold and keep going in that town.

Ken: What help did you get from the International?

Kar: Very little. They were poor at the time because they had these big strikes. And we didn't get any financial help. We got some moral help.

Ken: What influence did Gastonia, Passaic and Paterson -

Kar: That was our talking point. That was what we talked up to these people that they went out, they got something and that people should all stick together. That was the effect it did have.

Ken: How did you learn about the labor movement outside of your own community?

Kar: I already knew about it because of living in Philadelphia.

Ken: I mean what was going on while you were there.

Kar: I don't know what you mean?

Ken: Let me ask this - how did you know what was going on in the outside world?

Kar: I was reading. I had these labor papers. I had political papers, Socialist papers, and the others. And Then around that time we began to organize the Women's Federation in Massachusetts, and that meant we had delegates from various other groups.

Ken: That's what we're coming to now. First I want to know what did you know about the Women's Trade Union League?

Kar: At that time I didn't know too much. I found that out in later years. At that time I didn't know too much.

Ken: When did you find it out?

Kar: When I came to California.

Ken: It was an East oriented group wasn't it.

Kar: I don't think it was entirely East. When I got here it was already being talked about. I knew about it off hand, but I didn't, wasn't part of it.

Ken: Who organized the New England Working Women's Federation?

Kar: There were several women from Lawrence. And there was a woman from Boston, and myself from ^{Arlington} Easthampton, and there was one other from New York.

Ken: How did you get together?

Kar: We got together and met in Boston.

Ken: I mean, how did you find out about each other?

Kar: We wrote to each other. We found out that way. They wrote to me. Then I knew the Lawrence women. And we got together that way.

Ken: Was it through the union?

Kar: I knew them through the union. And then I had the Lithuanian Federation. I knew several Lithuanian women. And we got together and we began to organize that. And we began issuing that little paper.

Ken: It wasn't a union paper then?

Kar: No. It was asking women to organize, and it was a paper at that time we thought would take care of the entire women's movement, not only union women - women in factories, women in homes, and women who wanted better working privileges, and so on.

Ken: Who was the editor of the paper?

Kar: I can't think of her name now. We had our fictitious names anyway. We didn't use our own.

Ken: You were under Ann Allen?

Kar: Right.

Ken: Did you meet with these women?

Kar: Yes. I met with them. We had monthly meetings and we planned on what we would write in the paper and what we could do to help in various ways the women who wanted to organize, the women who wanted conditions, and so on.

Ken: How did you get the money to get together?

Kar: Well, the people had to raise money in their own community. And that's what we did. When I was in East ^{Arlington} ~~Hampton~~ I had a Polish group who worked with me, Polish women who liked the paper. I had given them copies and they gave money. They collected money among themselves. And none of us got paid, of course, just the expenses of the paper, travelling expenses, that was all.

Ken: What good did the paper do, finally?

Kar: I have a feeling that it helped organize the women in general.

Ken: Into the union, you mean?

Kar: Into the union and also for other things. I think it did an awful lot later on in nineteen twenty seven to organize protests against execution of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Kar: I think it did a splendid job for that.

Ken: I was going to ask this later, but I'll ask it now since you've told me about it. What did you do about that?

Kar: What could we do? We sent protests. We distributed hundreds and hundreds of leaflets throughout each community where we had connections. In fact we had mass meetings in various places, even in ~~East~~^{North}hampton - a mass meeting on the square. We asked the officials of the government at that time to come out with us and to sign the protest, and asked them to release, that they were innocent men. And then we had the women write letters to Mrs. Sacco telling her that we are backing her up in every way we can; that her husband is innocent. What is meant was women to women talk. In fact that's what we said, "Women to women would mean an awful lot. Let's give her encouragement." And the post office will know how many letters she is getting. And she did. She had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of letters from everywhere. And cards and letters saying that we are going to do what we can.

Ken: I've read about candlelight vigils.

Kar: I was in that vigil. We had that vigil just prior to the execution. And Mother Bloor was there, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. She was there with the leaders. And we stayed overnight. That night we went to Boston around the jail there with this candlelight, and we stayed all night waiting to see what would happen. Then we got word they were executed and we went home. I had a group of Polish women. There must have been something like seventeen women from the town, and they stayed overnight. They had children, and they were not communists or socialists. They were just plain women who were sorry for a woman; that she would be left a widow because her husband is going to be executed. That was our talk to women.

Ken: It must have been a dreadful night.

Kar: It was, really. We were crying there. Everybody had tears. Their eyes were red. Everybody was crying.

Kar: When I think of it, I cry even now.

Ken: What influence did the IWW have on you?

Kar: I had no connection whatsoever. I only knew about it from reading. I learned much more when I came here.

Ken: I was thinking of Patterson, you know.

Kar: I knew who they were, but somehow their policy did not draw me at all.

Ken: I don't know whether to ask you these questions now or not - you were still in Easthampton, ~~Vermont~~ ^{Massachusetts}. You were a member of the union and functioning there. But you were also functioning in getting labor laws changed. When did you get involved in the labor law business?

Kar: During the same period that we had this women's organization there. Now I lost the name of it - The Working Women's Federation. So we decided that there are still too many children working in the factories; that the child laws should be tightened; and that they should be at the age of fourteen and sixteen. So we went before the state body to get these laws changed. I went and, let's see, there must have been about eight of us. I know I was from this town, and there was two from Lawrence, three, I think, from Boston, and there was one from another town. I forget what it was. It was Holyoke, Massachusetts.

Ken: Was this supported by the textile union?

Kar: It was not. It wasn't supported. It was - I think what they did - they knew we were going -

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Second side of tape - counter #1

Ken: You were telling me how you went about changing laws.

Kar: We had a committee that went before the legislature in Boston, and they listened to us. Very friendly, very nice. For the first time, they claimed (people that knew) that they accepted a committee on such good terms. And they spoke to us and they were very friendly. And they put down everything we wanted. They took our suggestions. And about six months later the laws were restricted - changed a little bit.

Ken: Why do you think they accepted you? When they hadn't accepted other people?

Kar: I think because we were all women. That's the feeling I had. Because everybody said they'll never take you. They wanted us to work through legislators - that they are the proper people to bring in the law, and all that. So we had a few that worked with us; that wrote it out in proper manner. But we went to present them ourselves. And we told them that, that we wished to try it with women. And we were accepted. And everybody shook hands with us, and oh, we were just accepted beautifully. And about six months later they wrote to us that the best they could do, whatever it was, I think that they accepted age fifteen at that time. I am not going to go positive on that. I don't remember too well. But they accepted about three of our suggestions. And we were very happy about it. We had about eight of them. But they accepted three. And we expected if they accept one we will be happy. Well, they accepted three. And I went that time as Ann Alden because I was still working.

Ken: There was this woman, Mary O'Sullivan who ~~lived~~ was in the Lawrence, ^{strike} and in 1914 to 1934 she was an inspector for the Massachusetts Board of Labor and Industry. Did she ever show up in Easthampton, or did you ever hear of her?

Kar: I knew of her, but she never was with us. I have heard of her, I am positive.

Ken: Here's a question about legislation. When you were trying to change the laws, how did women feel about working shorter hours with no extra pay?

Kar: They said that if we work shorter hours this year, maybe next year we can get an increase. They were willing to go for conditions. They said they would be very happy to get conditions.

Ken: When you were discussing equal pay for equal work -

Kar: That didn't come up at that time. It came up later here in California. At that time they thought, well it's still a man's world and they couldn't do that. They wanted shorter hours. They wanted more pay and

- Kar: things of that sort, but they didn't go for that.
- Ken: Then they weren't doing men's work either.
- Kar: In textile, not so much of it anyway.
- Ken: Let me ask this question now because I've got it in mind. It has been said that if women got equal pay for equal work, then they would be laid off because the men would get the jobs.
- Kar: At the present time that's what they are thinking. We didn't discuss it in that manner years ago. But now they are discussing it with this ERA [Equal Rights ^{Amend} ~~Amendment~~].
- Ken: Then the other side of the coin would be that if women actually took men's jobs away, then they would be considered scabs?
- Kar: No. Not necessarily. No. Both of them need jobs today, so it isn't so. In those days -
- Ken: That's what I was thinking of - in those days.
- Kar: Right now the women need jobs as badly as men do.
- Ken: Were immigrant women treated differently than American women in the mills?
- Kar: There were mostly immigrant there anyway. I don't think so. I don't believe they had a real American there among the hundreds.
- Ken: There was another woman I wanted to ask you about - Mary Freitas.
- Kar: I never met her.
- Ken: She was in the Textile Workers Union and was one of the officials of the Women's Trade Union League.
- Ken: I never met her.
- Ken: You were really in the bookdocks in textile weren't you. You were away from the main stream.
- Kar: I was away because I worked in the smaller towns.
- Ken: There is another question about factories, I mean about the mills. Did you have foremen or forewomen?
- Kar: No foreladies. That was unheard of.
- Ken: How did the foremen treat the women?
- Kar: It depended on who he was. I had one that was a good man and he even helped us with the heavier work. He tried to push or pull or whatever was necessary. Others wouldn't

Kar: go near you. We had all kinds.

Ken: Did the women ever discuss with you their problems of household care, or children or anything?

Kar: They children, they did. They used to come and say, "You only have a daughter, how come?" They wanted to know. So even a long time after the deal with Margaret Sanger I used to give them information about having less children. Some of them would have three, four or five children already. They were working so hard, and the would say, "Gosh if I have to have another child and have to stay home again for a while." And they would come and ask questions. I was helpful that way. Whatever I knew, I gave them information,

Ken: What about the child care problem?

Kar: We never discussed that because it was unheard of in those days.

Ken: What did they do with the children when they worked?

Kar: The same as when you had the story of my mother. The children had to be left with older children, or with the old people. If they had a grandmother or something, or on the street. That's all. No, there was no child care - not til we came to California.

Ken: Now you were elected by the Women's Federation to be on the legislative committee for the State of Massachusetts. What Federation was this?

Kar: It was the women's/

Ken: What did the Federation do outside of lobby?

Kar: Not much we could do. That's all we could do. We just talked to women, asked them to support something financially and otherwise. And then we had this committee to go before the Legislature.

Ken: Was this technique of writing letters used?

Kar: Oh, yes, definitely. Every group had orders - so many letters and so many people to visit; so many legislators to get after. Some of these women who could speak English we had to separate them - now you get to go there and you get to go here. We talked to them. I went to Lawrence several times to talk to the women. I went to Boston to tell the women what to do and how to do it.

Kar: And of course in my own town I took an active part in organizing women. We couldn't go to the Legislature because it was too far away, in Boston. But what our women did, they wrote letters.

Ken: Outside of the union?

Kar: Yes. Outside of the union. The union had nothing to do with it.

Ken: Did the union know what you were doing?

Ka : The Union knew, and I think I even got a letter if I can find it where they said I was doing very fine work and helping the union in that manner.

Ken: I would love to see that letter.

Kar: I have it somewhere. His name was Albert Weinstock, I think. Weinstock was the head of the Textile union, and I have a letter from him somewhere if I can find it.

Ken: What else did you accomplish in this group?

Kar: That was about all. Outside of organizing for various legislation that we thought was needed. Sometimes we went. One time we succeeded and another time we didn't. And that was about all.

Ken: Wasn't Massachusetts the only state that had legislation for women?

Kar: No. No. They told us that time that some other states had it, but I don't know. I remember arguing that such and such had it, but I don't remember which state.

Ken: In this group of leading women you were part of (not in the union), the Federation, was there any discussion of the history of labor in textile like, the fight for the ten hour day and the Lowell community?

Kar: Naturally. Whenever we got together we had these discussions. Certainly. We didn't just sit. We had all kinds of historical discussions. We had some pamphlets. We had some magazine that time that various people had written. Ann Burlak had some articles. Other people had articles on what was going on. So we read them and we discussed them. We had to do that because what else could be talk about. We had quite frequent meetings outside of the union, not only as a union group, but as a women's.

Kar: My whole orientation was more towards women - to have them think - have them understand more what they should do - make more demands to be equal. So we had quite a few discussions in that Federation. Then of course coming further down you sent me a paper*(I had almost forgotten) where I went to Pennsylvania for that purpose. And that was in twenty seven. I lost a job that time in the textile. They laid off a lot of people, and they laid me off, of course. So I had time on my hands and the union decided that I should go to Pennsylvania. That was in ~~eighteen~~ nineteen twenty seven. I went there on my own. I had quite an experience because the men were miners - fathers, brothers, were all miners. And these young girls had nothing to do. And they wanted money. And with the miners pay, they were buying a little property, they had to support big families (they all had big families) they didn't have enough to have these girls dressed the way they wanted to to go to a dance or something. They wanted to look nice. So factories were very funny - the textile factories and garment factories, many garment factories. So they established little shops where they had a dozen working, at the most two dozen working in one place sewing or. It wasn't exactly textile, it was mostly sewing and rug weaving. They put in looms and brought the material there so they could produce. So these girls were weaving rugs and some kind of window shades and things of that sort. So I went out there to organize. That was around Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. There were terrible conditions among those working. They had not even sanitary conditions. They had to go outside in the wintertime. It didn't matter when. They had nothing sanitary, no water, drinking water - nothing. It was just the cheapest
- - - way they could possible establish a little workshop.

*Article by Paul Blanshard in The Nation, 5/15/29, which quoted an employer's leaflet mentioning that all leaders of the Textile Union were of foreign extraction. Sonia Kaross was one of those mentioned. It was re the Gastonia strike.

Kar: And that's what the bosses did. And there I had even confrontation with some of the bosses where I went out with leaflets. Not alone. There was a man with me. And we went out to distribute those leaflets. And when the boss saw me standing there at the gate he tried to pull them out and I wouldn't give them to him. And he tried to hit me, and I hit him back [laughter]. And he was a little shorty fellow and he slipped and fell. I didn't knock him over, but everybody thought I did. We had quite a time there. And we organized in several little towns at that time the nucleus of a union at that time, the textile union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. I told you I first organized in textile, but that's what I was doing, and I told them if the Amalgamated wants, if they come here to help you, go ahead. It doesn't make any difference. The union is what I told them. So I had quite a time there. I was away from home altogether about eight months. At that time my mother was taking care of my daughter and my husband was in Massachusetts working.

Ken: You were paid by the textile workers?

Kar: I was paid just enough to live on.

Ken: That's where they got your name when the employers said all the officials had foreign names.

Ken: So how did you succeed there?

Ken: I left a nucleus in those various places, in five of them, five different towns. I understand that the union existed for quite a while, and probably still does. I don't know.

Ken: How did you feel about leaving your daughter?

Kar: Naturally I felt badly, but I felt this was very important. And my husband was there, and my mother, so.

Ken: How did you live when you were organizing there?

Kar: Different people took us in. They took me in. One party kept me a month, another kept me three weeks, and so on. I had very little.

Ken: They weren't afraid?

Kar: No. They weren't afraid. One was a photographer,

Kar: the one I stayed with the longest, and another one was a dressmaker. So these people weren't afraid. They fed me and they wouldn't charge me anything. I was taken in like one of them.

Ken: And when you went out to visit people, did you also visit them at their homes?

Kar: Yes. We visited homes. I talked to some and those that didn't want to, I told them, "OK. Some other time when you want to, you come and talk to me. I am not going to argue with you." I never argued. I said, "This is not a proper time to argue. I know you believe different probably than I do. Just think things over, and if you ever want to talk more to me, you'll find me."

Ken: When you organized, did they sign a card and you sent it to the International?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: And they got books issued to them? How did you start a local then?

Kar: Well, you start a local - you get five or so that agree, and they have to meet secretly at first because until you have a majority. When you have a majority then you have an open local. Until then we don't. We tell the people we have already a substantial group. Now you must join or else you will be left out. Not many were left out that way.

Ken: This may sound odd, but I really want to know the answer. Why did these women join? What was your talking point?

Kar: Because of more money and conditions. Because I told them there is no need for you to go for your drinking water outside of the place or there is no need to go for anything else outside around the barn. I said if the boss can't give you better conditions, then you should demand them. And the people did.

Ken: Were the older women more militant there than the younger women?

Kar: Yes. The younger women, during that period, they thought they are not going to work all the time. Their ideology, the young women, they thought, Oh, I am not going to work all my life. I am going to get married and stay home.

Kar: Today that's changed completely. But those days that was the thought. The older women couldn't put it into their heads - "Look, we're working, and you will probably have to work to." But they said, "Oh, no. I am going to marry the man that's making enough and I am going to stay home." All through my younger days when I was organizing that was the idea.

Ken: What was your impression of the textile workers leaders in those days?

Kar: I thought they were all right because at that time politically I didn't have any discussions with them. I had no need. I had no occasion. But as far as organizing, naturally they wanted organization. The bigger organization, the better for them, the more honor for them. They wanted to be elected on the basis that "since I've been an organizer so many people have come in. I was able to do it." (It was always "I" those days) I had no reason to go against them because from that point of view they were with it.

Ken: What techniques of organizing did you learn from them?

Kar: I didn't learn anything from them, if that's what you mean. Each place and everywhere I went I had to devise my own way of organizing. In some places you could probably call the people together on the basis that we want to talk about your work. And another place you go, well let's talk as women. We didn't dare say anything about work. Let's talk as women. When we got together talking as women, then we got to talk about working. And you get them organized. Each place had to be different. There was no one way of doing. Today they go and say, "we are organizing you" period. But not those days.

Ken: Were there any women you discussed your organizational problems with?

Kar: Not top women. When we came together with the group we are organizing we talked, "how long have you worked" and "what conditions have you got" and then it all comes out. And then you say, "Look, all of

Kar: you together, you have worked so many years and haven't gotten any improvement in those years. Isn't it time you got something?" And you begin talking like that and the women start thinking, sure, we must do something. And we were able to get them organized. I never had a hard time. To get them to stay ~~xxxxxxx~~ - when I left, some of them left too. Many of these groups broke up. But to get them together wasn't hard, to start something.

Ken: Would they break up because they didn't have any leadership after you left?

Kar: Right.

Ken: How were you able to try to combat this, to train people yourself?

Kar: It was hard. I wasn't there. I left them with the feeling that they all can do something; that they can pull this organization together; and that they must pull it together if they want their conditions. But when you leave things turn different.

Ken: You are not there long enough?
Or if I was in the area.

Kar: No. It is hard for anybody to come in and try to organize them and expect them all to keep their organization. I learned that very powerfully because every time because I felt for these women. You know, I talked to them and organized them. I felt that if I was there I am pretty sure we could do something. And then when I left and learned they had given up, I felt sorry that the effort was wasted, I felt. Although later on I found out (several years later) that it wasn't exactly wasted. For instance they re-joined. If they re-joined they already had a little teaching. They remembered. I am pretty sure of that. I feel that way.

Ken: How many women did you run into that you would call natural leaders? Were they rare, or were they -

Kar: Well, yes, rare. Mainly women felt, it is probably not my job. You know those days the women felt that this is more of a man's job. And then when a woman was organizing they wanted to know how I was living.

Kar: And if I told them I had a baby and a husband, some of them felt shocked. How could I leave and come out here and stay. You had to fight that down too and show them that you are here because you feel that it's your duty ~~as~~ well as my duty to raise my family. But it was not easy at the time.

Ken: I can imagine not.

Kar: That's true.

Ken: Let's go back. What do you think the textile workers officials thought about you?

Kar: In those days I think that they felt pretty good. Later on I had a little difficulty. In those days there were very few women outside of those like Ann Burlak and some of these others. They had very few women who stepped out and were able to reach other women. In a few places it was easier for a woman to reach women than ~~it~~ it was for a man to reach women with an organization. So they had a pretty good opinion at that time.

Ken: Oh yes, I want to know. When you were on this Women's Committee to visit the legislators, why did you go?

~~Kxxx~~ The ^{unions} ~~unions~~ couldn't enforce things?

Kar: The unions weren't even trying to enforce those things in those days. Even though they had those big strikes in Lawrence and everything they didn't go to legislation with anything. They just tried to get conditions now, today, wherever they can, and that was it. So I felt that that wasn't enough; if we had our State locked into it with some kind of a law passed it made it more secure for the women. And that's why I went.

Ken: When these laws were passed, how were they implemented?

Kar: Not badly. I think that they issued their papers to all the factories that they have got to come through with such and such a law, and they did pretty good. I wouldn't say perfect, but all right. It was better than if one union got it somewhere and another union some other corner and the center was all left. Unions were not so keen politically, working with political legislation.

Ken: You started something that now exists as a common practice.

Kar: Today, yes. We all talked about it. In those days, no.

Ken: When you were organizing these women, were they strictly women's locals you were organizing, or did men belong to?

Kar: Men belonged. Very few men, because few men worked in that kind of industry. They were small overseers in a department of five women. That might be a man. They didn't even have foreladies, women. Today we have a forelady. Those days you had a foreman, not a forelady. The foremen might come in. Some did. Some didn't. "You are organizing women. Well, go ahead. I am not interested." Few did come in. Very few.

Ken: We were talking about this article in the Nation in May of 1929 when Blanchard quoted from the employers' leaflet in Gastonia, did you get any reaction to that article? Do you remember anything happening at that time?

Kar: I think it was 1927 because in ~~1929~~ 1929 we were already in California. And I gave up the organization in Massachusetts and we came to California in July of 1929. The article might have been written later,

Ken: I just wondered if you had any backfire from it.

Kar: No. Not that I know of.

Ken: Then the employers were just using your name?

Kar: That's right. They were using my name because I had just been there. I would say I took in ten towns that I was able to organize.

Ken: You weren't in Gastonia at all then?

Kar: No. I used it as an example in organizing-

End of tape

OK
SKB

Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Wednesday, August 10, 1977, at home
of Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin: Tape #4 - page 92 - counter #1

Today is Wednesday, August 10, 1977, and this is the fifth
tape with Sonia Baltrun Kaross for the California Historical
Society, Women in California Collection.

Ken: As usual, there are some things left over from last
time. When I was reading the tape about the Sacco
and Vanzetti case, it was in Massachusetts and you
were involved in it, they were supported by two men
who were jailed in the Textile strike in Lawrence,
and these two men helped in the campaign for the life
of Sacco and Vanzetti. Can you tell me a little bit
more about what happened the night Sacco and Vanzetti
were executed? If you were writing - what would you
write about it?

Kar: I would write that many people from Massachusetts,
and possibly Connecticut and other states, converged
on Boston and they all gathered around as near as
they could before the police cordon broke them away
from the prison; as near as they could towards the
prison.

Ken: How did the police cordon break them away?

Kar: They stood there and they wouldn't let us go through
certain streets which would be quite near the prison.
And we had to stay away, I would say within five blocks
of the prison. And the masses were huge, and many of
these people naturally were from various factories,
shoe factories, and where many Italians were working.
And these two were Italians, and the Italian
community came out to see what they could do to
protest and see if they could save them at the
last minute. And others were from the textile
industry from the various mills around Massachusetts.

Kar: Abd from a small town like Easthampton, we must have been there, about five ~~hundred~~ ^{one little} people just from that ~~xxxxx~~ town. Most of the people that came I noticed were women from the textile industry. Of course from the shoe factories there were quite a few men. But there were huge groups of women that came from many of the factories.

And that night we had that candlelight parade. And there was no end to it. And we went from street to street, around blocks in that part of Boston where the prison was. There must have been a hundred thousand people at least. Of course I am not able to judge that because I was in the crowd. But I noticed that as we walked, and then as we stopped finally, that big groups were gathered.

And they carried various banners. Some of these were snatched by the police, of course, of those that were closer to the police. But the police were not in the middle of the group. So many of them still carried the banners asking not to murder innocent people.

Ken: What did it look like, all these candles?

Kar: Well, it was sort of wierd because that night there wasn't much moonlight, and it looked very wierd. And the streets were not lit too well. However, we rejoiced in that thinking that this is a mass, and because of the mass of people we might be able to do something. However towards morning we heard that it was futile. Than the crowd began to - ^{many} of them cried. Some were singing. Then finally, little by little, around ten o'clock in the morning, they began dispersing.

Ken: How did the women you were with feel?

Kar: Well, most of the women were crying, even those who didn't know Sacco and Vanzetti. Most of us didn't know them, just through the newspapers, what they did and who they were. But these women somehow felt akin to them because many of the women in the textile industry were foreign born women.

Ken: How were you involved in the post Sacco Vanzetti -

Kar: By distributing leaflets - various meetings, and distributing through out the town. Several of us went nights because they were afraid of being fired from the job.

Ken: Was this the meeting in ~~xxxx~~^{East}hampton that John Dos Passos spoke at?

Kar; Yes. It was in Northampton. ~~xxxx~~^{East}hampton was small and Northampton was larger.

Ken: How did you go about distributing leaflets?

Kar: When we were away from our own neighborhood we distributed them openly, but closer to our neighborhood in a smaller town like Easthampton we had to distribute at nights or at certain times when we would not be seen.

Ken: Who was the we?

Kar: A group of us women. I had, I believe, a group of around fifteen that were willing to go nights. Some had small children, family women, yet they were willing to do that. And we would gather at night about ten o'clock and distribute leaflets until twelve to the houses - drop them on the front porch of these houses.

Ken: What happened after Sacco and Vanzetti were executed?

Kar: After that we had one more meeting which was held on the square, and the people were asked to organize and see that organization brings about better conditions for people; and that this would never happen. But somehow there was no life to the meeting because everybody felt (especially those that went) they all felt it futile. It was sort of a let down for everybody.

But soon after we began to organize again, our union.

Ken: I see. Thanks a lot for that. Now there are a number of other questions. Did you know Eugene Debs?

Kar: I didn't meet him personally. I met him at a meeting in Philadelphia.

The Socialist Party split

Ken: Now the other question is - when the Socialist party split in 1919 and the Communist Party was formed, what part did you play in that?

Kar: I was elected as a delegate to the convention from the Young ~~Communist~~ ^{Socialist} League, and also from the Lithuanian Socialist group.

Ken: What convention was that?

Kar: That was the convention in Chicago to organize the Communist Party. I went to the convention as a delegate from these two groups.

Ken: This was after the split, the convention was called?

Kar: No. It was called for the purpose of organizing the Communist Party. At that time I wouldn't call it a split. We were still Socialists, the Socialist Federation.

[tape turned off]

I would say we were thinking of organizing a Communist Party, and this convention was called for that purpose.

[tape turned off]

Ken: Here's a question I want to ask you. What was the difference in the way you functioned as a Socialist and the way you functioned as a Communist?

Kar: No. different.

Ken: If that's the case, why did they change from the Socialist Party to the Communist Party?

Kar: The parties were different - it had a different view from the Socialist, especially on the question of fatherland and the defense of fatherland at that time, and the two parties were very different.

Ken: I see - but the way you functioned was the same?

Kar: The same. I had the same function.

Skilled Unions in Easthampton
Karn: Now in Easthampton, what kind of organization did the skilled workers have, THE SKILLED workers in unions? Did those unions meet there?

Kar: Yes they had their meetings. They belonged to loom fixers, machinists union, and weavers union. They all had separate unions. They belonged to unions. They met in various parts of the town. I guess they had meetings, but we were never invited there or I didn't know about their meetings.

Ken: How did they function as a group? Was there a central labor council?

Kar: No. They had contact with their own internationals. That was it.

Ken: When the textile union officials came to town, how did they contact these people?

Kar: They didn't. In fact there were several small strikes of the loom fixers. The whole factory had to go out. Five hundred people went out for five loom fixers because every time there was a strike they would picket the mill and they would close it, and naturally those that didn't belong to any union (which was the major part of the workers) they had to obey, and they had to stay out.

THE UNION

Ken: What effect did this have when you started organizing?

Kar: When the union started organizing, we said "see how wrong it is - " [phone rings - tape turned off] It affected us in this way, that the people were kind of angry that we had to stay out any time any of these skilled people went out we had to stay out too. And we got no pay checks and we got no benefits from it. So when we started organizing it was an easy question to answer - "If you organize, then you are going to get the benefits too. We will strike together." So that is why it wasn't hard at times to organize them. But then when we weren't able to conduct a good strike many times then naturally the people were depressed again, and we had to do it all over.

It wasn't easy work, especially among some of these foreign born people who didn't understand

Kar: what a strike meant, exactly why we can't talk to a boss without striking, and various other questions. But finally we did organize.

Ken: Why do you think there wasn't any confrontation with the police and no arrests in Easthampton when so much hell went on in Gastonia, Passaic, Lawrence and other places?

Kar: Because I think the people were not organized before, and didn't know what the organization meant, and they were very calm. They just went home and stayed home. We had a few watching the factory. And the factory could not get scabs, so there was no fear of that. There was no confrontation except that they stayed home.

Ken: I wondered because there was such a difference.

Kar: I felt that that was the reason. At no time did we ever raise the question that we had to have a mass picketing because the boss is going to bring in scabs or that they are going to do something at the factory. We didn't have to do that.

Ken: Why no scabs?

Kar: Because there weren't people they could get there. If they advertised the people who were working - you see in larger cities they had all kinds of people and they always had some unemployed - and in this town they didn't.

Ken: When you left Easthampton on this eight month trip, how did the union keep going?

Kar: Well they kept going. I wasn't the only person in the union. They had committees, and they had their meetings, and they just kept going.

Ken: Before you left, did you tell them why you were going?

Kar: I told them to organize other places. And they were very glad about it. And they wished me good luck, and that was it. And when I came back I found everything in order. In fact they didn't even have many meetings. They had one or two meetings in that period.

Ken: You mentioned, after we had finished the tape and were talking a little bit, that one of the places you had been in was Lowell. I wondered what your

Ken: experiences were there.

Kar: It was just talking to the people about organizing. I didn't know the area. I didn't know the factories, so I couldn't do much that way. I was just speaking about how other places I knew about organized and how they kept their organization together. I just had a meeting with them.

Ken: Were you there long?

Kar: Several days.

Ken: What I was curious about, was I wondered if the people there remembered that at one time Lowell was a model mill community. It started as a model community.

Kar: As far as I know, yes they did, and they told me what they remembered from way back. And we had a discussion around that issue. At the time I was there, however, it wasn't a model any more.

Ken: Did you ever meet any of the women who had belonged to the Lowell Female Reform Organization?

Kar: I met some, but I couldn't tell you just who they were. They came to that meeting, that textile meeting at the time. I even had a few people at that meeting, as I remember, that came from shoe factories. Whether they were Lowell I am not going to say, or whether they were from nearby communities, but they had a lot of small shoe factories around that area. Most people came to hear because they knew who I was, and they came to hear what I had to say. We had a very important meeting, and they asked questions about organization. And they wanted to know how the South was being organized, if it was. Because at that time already there were quite a few strikes in the South and already factories had closed and moved like they were threatening. These were the subjects which were in their minds.

Ken: When you left, what happened?

Kar: As far as I know, they kept their organization. They had a strike, a small strike, and they settled it. And they wrote to me one time, and I should have that letter. They wrote to me and they said that they had

Kar: learned a lot and they were very glad that their strike was conducted right.

Ken: I would love to see that letter.

Kar: I don't know if I can find it.

Ken: I'll go through your attic for you [laughter]
I wondered, particularly there, because there was such a rich background in the town itself.

Now this was a period when the Trade Union Educational League or the Trade Union Unity League was formed. Were you a member of the Trade Union Unity League?

Kar: Not there. I think it was formed a little later than that. When I came here, it was just about the time they started organizing.

Ken: It was the Trade Union Educational League then?

Kar: Later it turned into the Trade Union Unity League. *

Ke : Those are all the left over questions. Now we are going to come to California.

Coming to California

Ken: Let me recapitulate. You were an organizer in Easthampton, the International sent you on an eight month organizing trip, and you came back home again. When you came back, what did you do?

Kar: I went back to work in another factory there, making rubber garters. I worked there on the spooling machine for a while.

And we decided (my daughter was ill) on the doctor's advice, to go to a better climate. And my husband was working for a meat packing company. So he had asked if he could get transferred (We were afraid to move during that period with unemployment all over) and they gave him a transfer to Oakland. So we moved here and that was in 1929.

*T.U.E.L. created in Chicago in 1920, began activities in February, 1922. T.U.U.L. organized in Cleveland at a convention ON August 31, Spt. 1, 1928. Organized Labor in American History - Philip Taft.

Kar: She was about eight years old.

Ken: Did your mother come with you?

Kar: No. We moved, just the three of us. We came by machine, an old Ford. We drove across the country.

Ken: And where did you live here?

Kar: We lived in Oakland, proper, several places. We rented. Our daughter felt a little better and finally we did have to give her to Dell Valley Preventorium. She stayed there eleven months.

Ken: Where?

Kar: Dell Valley Preventorium. It was near here. She had T.B. [tuberculosis] - a touch of T.B.

Ken: What was your first job in California.

Kar: Before I got into textile I had various jobs. I worked in a hospital as helper to a cook, and then I started organizing ^{domestic workers} houseworkers. I worked in several houses, doing housework. Then finally -
Organizing Household Workers

Ken: Wait a minute. Not so fast. What made you think about organizing household workers?

Kar: Because I got acquainted with several women who were working, and their conditions were very bad.

Ken: What were the conditions?

Kar: They worked long hours. They get very little pay. The work was hard. They had to keep going to clean up, or cook, or whatever you do. So we decided we were going to organize and see what we can do. Among the group was quite a big group of black women, and quite a few white women. But most of them were Black women. We finally decided to pay something like ten or fifteen cents a month dues. We had a group of around fifty, and we tried to ask the A.F. of L. [American Federation of Labor] if they would do something. And here the local A.F. of L. refused. They didn't even answer us. And then they had a convention here. And at that convention we couldn't get in.

So finally they had an A.F. of L. Convention in San Francisco where I appeared before that convention.

Kar: and I was the only woman ever allowed to get up and say something. They couldn't get rid of me very well.

Ken: How did you -

Kar: I first sent a letter and didn't get an answer. Then I went into the hall and went to the podium and I told them that I am going to speak whether they like it or not. And they gave me the mike [microphone].

Ken: What did you say?

Kar: I told them ^{how} hard it was for the women here; that it was a trade that they should organize. That it is all over the country; women are working everywhere. They are working for such low wages and the conditions are so bad it is up to the labor organization to see if they could do something for them. I got a tremendous clapping. And they left it all to the executive board. Of course I never heard any more.

Ken: Was this a State Federation or a National Federation?

Kar: This was a National Federation.

Ken: What year was that?

Kar: That was in nineteen thirty four. Whether it was thirty three or thirty four, I haven't had time to check back.

Ken: What happened after that?

Kar: After that I went into -

Ken: I mean, what happened to your group of fifty women?

Kar: It was disbanded. We couldn't do anything. We had a few dollars we donated to other strikers. I don't know which group was on strike at that time. I think it was the Longshoremen.

Ken: The group of women felt they couldn't do anything by themselves?

Kar: As long as they were not going to accept us, what could we do. We couldn't reach into other parts of the country. This way we thought that they will start organizing all over the country, will start a movement, so that was it. I understand now they are trying to organize again. I saw it in a labor paper a couple of weeks ago.

Hop Picking - Vigilantes

Ken: Didn't you mention hop picking somewhere along the line?

Kar: That was summertime. I went twice. The first summer I went with an old couple and ^{we} lived in their house, and he knew about it [the job]. I went there and stayed two or three weeks, and got back with a couple of dollars. That was all. That was towards the end of the season.

So the following year I went again and I stayed six weeks in the fields. And we had a thought at that time - I got in with that, whether it was Trade Union Unity League or Trade Union Committee or something of that sort - I got in with that. And we decided that in these various places, among the hop orchards, we would try to organize the hop workers, because they were getting less than a penny per pound of picked hops. And you know how light they are. And the workers - what they made, they had to buy groceries. They had to buy them from the same people because there were no stores there- the people that were hiring you.

So we started organizing and we organized quite a few of the workers. And there it was hard to organize women. It was easier to get the men to join than it was to get the women, because they had little children and they took them right in the field with them. And they were scared I guess that if there was a fight or something the children would be hurt. However we had some, and when we started organizing and the bosses got news that we were being organized they had several - the first night the vigilantes came and burned a cross. And that wasn't enough, so the following night they burned another cross and they started shooting in the air, scaring the people. And then leaflets came out that they are not only going to burn crosses where they are working but they are going to burn crosses in their own homes. And it scared the people. And I left too. My six weeks were up and I came home.

Ken: Where was this?

Kar: This was near Santa Rosa. I don't remember the name of the orchard, the field rather, not the orchard.

Ken: Who put out the employer leaflets?

Kar: The vigilantes. And that second night when they shot in the air they came all dressed in white with the sheets over them and it scared the people because after work they were sleeping. Most of us were sleeping outside anyway in sleeping bags under trees. And they all got up, and they all got scared and came in a group, and we just stood there until they finished and left. Nobody was hurt. But that ended the organization. It was a scary thing.

Prune picking

Kar: After that I got a job in the prune orchard picking prunes. That we couldn't organize. People were scared. Vigilantes were all over California during that year. And if women, their husbands were out of work. There was such unemployment during that period. We couldn't organize.

Side two of tape Counter #1

Ken: Do you remember any other activities you participated in before you went into textile?

Ka : Let's see. I did work somewhere else, but I don't remember just exactly where. I did get a job in one of the hosiery mills here. It didn't last long because they were laying off. They hired me for a couple of weeks and they laid me off. It was here in San Leandro. There was a small hosiery mill. I had no chance to do anything there.

Peace Movement

Ken: I want to check now, I think this is a good time before going into your textile work - You were already involved in peace work during this period. You went to that convention in Amsterdam, so that was in between all the jobs you had. How did you get involved with the peace movement in California?

Kar: Through the same newspaper, the women's paper. It had various groups in various cities, so I got connected with the group here.

Ken: The women's paper?

Kar: Right. I got connected with the group, and through that I got connected with a group led by other women here, english women. One of them was Anita Whitney, if you remember. She was in the peace movement of the type they had during that period. Then there was Gertrude Warwick here in Oakland. And by the way we had already had quite a few battles here for some kind of unemployment help from the government. Anita Whitney, Gertrude Warick and myself, we were gassed here in Oakland at a time when we were making a plea for the workers to organize.

Ken: Were you with the Unemployed Councils?

Kar: Yes. We were gassed and we were quite sick.

Ken: What happened? Begin at the beginning.

Kar: That was during the nineteen thirties, thirty one or thirty two that we started an organization here, the Unemployed Councils, and these Unemployed Councils wanted either work or wages. This was their slogan. And we had various meetings, street meetings, and we had hall meetings. And at those meetings of course there were other women, Anita Whitney, Gertrude Warwick and a few others that participated. So we nearly every second night had night meetings on corners of the streets, speaking to people, to the unemployed, to let's get together and march to the city hall and demand work or wages. So that's where we had the confrontation with the police. The police beat some of us up and I was in jail along with quite a few others in Oakland.

Later on we had women's meetings, various women's meetings. We demanded that they do something to change the situation we found ourselves in where our men are unemployed, they couldn't get any jobs, and the people were starving. And again we had trouble with

Kam: where they watched us and arrested some of us.

I know Anita Whitney was arrested quite a few times during that period. I was arrested as many times as she was during that period.

Ken: Did you ever come to trial?

Kar: I did, with a group of others, and we were let out on bail. And then finally when it came time for appearance in court - at that time Earl Warren was one of the judges here - and what he did was he took our bail and let us go. And that was a terrible blow because we couldn't repay these people who had put up bail for us.

Ken: You had individual bails - the International Labor Defense didn't bail you out?

Kar: They did. But there was not enough money in the International Labor Defense for all of us. So some of us, I myself and a few of the others, asked friends to bail us out. I know it wasn't big bail - something like one hundred and fifty dollars - but those days it meant money and for about eight of us it was quite a sum of money. They kept the money and they let us go.

Ken: They fine you that amount, in other words?

Kar: Yes. That's what they meant.

Ken: You were tear gassed too?

Kar: We were tear gassed, and one time here the police [recorder shut, and discussion took place on whether to include the following in the transcript - it was agreed ^{not} to do].

XXXXX

Ken: When they tear gassed you, did all these things happen at street corner meetings, or were they at large mass meetings?

Kar: There were some other larger meetings. For instance we had a demonstration at the city hall in Oakland, quite a good sized demonstration. Some of us got up there on the steps of city hall to speak, and the police came and they started beating us up. Some were men that they beat up pretty badly and I was hit very hard too, so badly that I had quite a lump on my head

Kar: Finally I couldn't recover from it. I was in very bad condition with headaches and bleeding of my nose. And after a while I didn't have a sense of smell. So friends of mine had gotten together and they sent me to Mayo clinic. I think it is in Minnesota, Mayo Brothers. They operated on me, and I got pretty well after that.

Ken: Nobody ever did anything to the police about that?

Kar: No. So that is something I carry to this day, that my sense of smell is not keen any more. And it hurt my hearing quite a bit.

Ken: ~~They~~^{ly} hit you deliberately?

Kar: Naturally. They were beating all of us that were on the steps of the city hall. There were three or four men and I was among them.

Ken: Were you arrested that time?

Kar; We were arrested, yes. We were arrested, but they let us go. They didn't have any bail for us at all. They told us to go home.

Ken: With your bleeding head.

Kar: Yes.

Peace Work

Ken: You were attached to this Lithuanian Women's group. Did they invite any other women to this peace conference.

Kar: No. I was the only one from the entire country's organization. Plus I got a credential too from the local group too, of women. I don't mean Lithuanian women, I mean peace women. So I went to that Convention. And the Lithuanian women decided - they decided that as long as I was going to Holland that I should go and see the Soviet Union. And they raised enough money from Holland ^{trip} to go to the Soviet Union.

Ken: What kind of women belonged to the Lithuanian Women's Group?

Kar: Working women, housewives, all women that wanted to join.

Ken: What was their main activity?

Kar: Issuing of the paper, and holding meetings and raising funds to help strikers, to help our newspaper because

Kar: labor papers as you know cannot go on their own. They have to have some help from outside. They don't have enough advertising or anything of that sort.

Ken: Did you say this was a women's paper?

Kar: Yes, and we were also supporting other language papers.

Ken: What part did you play in the publishing of the women's paper?

Kar: Originally I was manager of the paper in Philadelphia. First it was published in Philadelphia and then it was transferred to New York.

Ken: How did you feel about continuing writing?

Kar: I always did - continued right along and to this day.

Ken: How did you feel about discrimination against women during that period?

Kar: Naturally it was a big - quite a bit of feeling because it was much more evident than it is today. The pay was much smaller for the same work, and in every other way they were more discriminated. In every way the woman felt she was more discriminated against than the men were.

Ken: What did you do about it?

Kar: [laughter] Just had meetings. We tried to bring the issues before the public in every way we could through the newspaper, through meetings.

Ken: When you became extremely active in union work, how did this affect your association with peace groups?

Kar: It didn't. I still continued working with peace groups. When I came back from Holland, I believe I mentioned -

Ken: Yes, the tour. What was the name of the peace group Anita Whitney, Gertrude Warwick and that group were in? Women for Peace?

Kar: No, it wasn't Women for Peace. I can't think of the name. Some of these meetings were held in the name of Women's International League too. [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom].

Kar: I was a member since its inception. I still am a member at large here. I don't belong to any of the groups. I continued paying and I am getting their paper and so on. They had a part, Anita and the others, in sending me to Holland.

Textile

Ken: Now tell me how you got started in textile.

Kar: In textile - naturally that always worried me because I knew there was some textile out here. And knowing there was a mill here on twenty-third. (There was a mill on twenty-third avenue here in Oakland) I often thought it would be good if I could get to it and organize it. So finally I did get a connection and I went around to the houses.

Around twenty-third avenue, twenty-fourth and twenty fifth, around that area, most of these people were Portuguese living in those little houses there. And they were all textile workers. So I went from house to house and talked to them and asked them how much they were making. And I told them how people were organizing all over; how they were striking in the South for better wages; how ^here I came from, Massachusetts, they got better conditions because they organized.

And they told me that time that they tried at times to get an organization and those who organized them finally skipped after they got the money, or something. And they were very much disillusioned. And I told them, how can you be with such an organization, like in San Francisco and the area is known as one of the best organized towns and cities in the country, and you people should want an organization. So finally they decided that if they can be sure I am not going to skip on them like the other did - So I told them how I have a daughter who has been ill, and we had to come here and live, and my husband is a working man here, and that I don't intend to skip.

So they began to meet in houses. We met in

Kar: one house and then another in little groups from those areas. And finally we got into a hall, a Portuguese hall there, and we had quite a number. There were over five hundred working at the time. So about half of that came, about two hundred and fifty came to the first meeting. And they got enthused, very much enthused about getting an organization together.

So I told them I will write to the Textile (It was under AFL. It was not CIO yet.). So I wrote to the International and I asked them if they would send application blanks and if they would give me authority to organize them, which they did. I showed them the credentials - official - and at the second meeting we had we had nearly the entire group. Of course we had some that came there to break up, but they were put out of the hall pretty quickly, when they started something, by the same people.

Ken: How did they try to break the meeting up?

Kar: They came and started saying, "Oh, you'll never get organized here because you know what happened before. It's going to happen again, the same thing. They all want your money." So these people, the majority of them, the men especially, they just booted them out of the hall. And the people all signed the cards. Nearly everybody in that mill signed up.

So it was that easy, I thought, to organize. Finally I wrote to the International, sent the applications. They sent the charter, and there we had an organization.

And then we worked out a contract to the employer and began asking for conditions.

Ken: Was this the California Woolen Mill?

Kar: No, the California Textile Mill in Oakland.

Ken: You never worked there?

Kar: No. I never worked there. So when we had the contract we worked out for the employers and asked them to meet with us, we selected a committee. I told them

Kar: I wasn't going to do it alone. You are going to come with me. I mean the committee.

During that period, before an answer from the employer, you know somebody stopped me on the street near the mill, a well dressed man. And he wanted to know if I would take five hundred dollars and not bother the people. I told him, "No. I am not one of those. I am not taking a penny." At that time I hadn't even taken a penny from the workers for anything I was doing. And I said, "I am not one of those and I am not going to sell myself for any money." He said, "You'll never organize them." I said, "I'll try." And I walked away from him.

So we had a meeting that same night. I told them at the meeting, I said, "Look. I don't know if it is safe for me even to walk." So they had a bodyguard for me, from when I came to the meeting until I got home.

And we got pretty well organized, and we were half way through the contract - during that same period the steelworkers (I think it was steelworkers, or auto workers, I forget which) had their sitdown strikes. So one morning I get a call from the workers. They said, "They are sitting down in the factory. They want you there." Before they had a chance to do anything they were so enthused -

Ken: You had been meeting with the employers already?

Kar: Yes. They were so enthused, the workers, they just couldn't wait [laughter]. So they saw somebody else was doing that, they were going to do the same thing. So I got there to the factory and here they were, from the windows, hollering to me, "Tell our wives to bring our lunch. We are going to sit here." [laughter] I had to beg them to come down. I said, "We haven't even started talking. This is no time yet. You can do that later. Please don't do that now." Well, they wanted immediately a contract. I said "Maybe we will today, but give us a chance, and get your committee out of there." The committee was sitting too. I said, "Get your committee out of there so we can meet with the employer." I had to contend with all that because

Kar: the people never were organized, and they were mostly, as I said, Portuguese foreign born people, but they heard about the others and they were going to do the same thing. So I had my first sit down strike on my hands. So after one night the strike was over. They really came down, and we finally got an agreement, and not a bad agreement for the first time.

Ken: How do you think the fact that they were militant enough to sit in affected your negotiations?

Kar: I think they affected them very well. I think they won better conditions because they did that. At that time it was sort of like a breakdown because I didn't know how to handle the thing. But I think it worked out well and we, the first contract we got we got pretty good conditions. They were only making fifteen and a half cents an hour and we got raised to twenty five [cents] which was good money. The people were very happy with the contract. And from then on, of course, everything went smooth.

We had other strike threats and all that by the workers when they wanted more than the employers were willing to pay. We had a pretty good union there, a very good union.

Ken: How were you received as a woman organizer? *As A woman*

Kar: In that place I was received very, very well. Later on when I started organizing in San Francisco, other textile groups, at times I had a very hard time because I was a woman.

Ken: How?

Kar: Well, for instance, I organized the shade workers in one place, and after I got them organized, they talked to me, and they were willing. They took the blanks and returned them to me. They took them to the office of the union, and afterwards they decided that they would rather have a man, and asked can I send them a man. I asked them why, what did they see that I did wrong. I said, "I am willing to send you a man."

Kar: If you actually waet one I will get somebody."
I said, "What have you against me?" They didn't have anything except "You are a woman". So I had to break that down and tell them if I don't do what you want, if you don't get the conditions, or you think that the boss can give you more because a man will talk to them, and not a woman, then you can tell me and we will transfer you to maybe a union that has men instead of women organizers. So they agreed to wait, and finally they were happy without it.

And the same thing happened in various other places. I morganized fish line manufacturers -

Ken: Sunset Line and Twine?

Kar: Yes, and I had the same trouble there. They said, "Well, gee you're a woman. Wouldn't it be better if you sent us a man?" And then several places, a rope factory in San Francisco.

Ken: Tubbs Cordage?

Kar: Yes, Tubbs Cordage. When I organized that I had a little trouble because most of them were men. There were only very few women working there, and they thought, "When is a man coming around?" And so I told them that the days are coming when women and men will work together - "Now you people have got to take that. But if you really don't want me, OK, we will get a man for you." But I got by. Organizational Tactic-Curtain

Then, with the curtain workers, the organization of curtain workers was very strange. I organized one shop, a small shop, and we had quite a few bigger shops where there were up to one hundred people working. And we couldn't get in at all to organize, and there was nobody that knew who worked there. So finally one day I issued some leaflets. I came as they were leaving, I gave them these leaflets. And in these leaflets I said - you are the only one that hasn't signed the card [laughter] and we are going to hold a meeting with the employers, and if you people do not join, naturally you'll be left out. And you know they flocked to the union hall that night [laughter] and

Kar: I had one hundred percent organization. And what started this, I sent a letter asking for negotiations with the employer to the one that I had organized, plus all the others, that your employees have organized and they want a union, so we would like to have you people meet for negotiations; and told them the type of contract that we want that we had worked out in the other shop.

And naturally the bosses were wild. They came out into the shop and they held a meeting and told the employees that was a dirty trick that you people organized and didn't let us know, and "look what they want. They want so much wages, so much pay, and- ". These people were all goggle eyed they thought, well, gee, I must be the only one not organized. So when I gave leaflets that night, they all flocked to the union and joined.

Ken: You are as bad as John L. Lewis who told people Roosevelt wanted them to join the union.

Kar: Well, it was the only way I could organize them.

I had a pretty good organization. I had three locals, and formed a joint board. I was the manager of the Joint Board, and I had an International credential [for West Coast Organizer]. For twenty two years after that I was re-elected year, after year, after year in spite of being a woman. And there were men running for my job, and I was always re-elected. And even the International, towards the end, knowing that I was a radical, and the union was not - even they sort of put pressure on the men to get in there and take it away from me. And I was re-elected until I resigned of my own accord.

Ken: Were you a member of the Central Labor Council in San Francisco.

Central Labor Council

Kar: Yes.

Ken: The A.F. of L. Central Labor Council?

Kar: Yes. And then we switched.

Ken: There were so few women in the A.F. of L. Central Labor

Ken: Council -

Kar; There was only one other woman and myself.

Ken: Jenny [Matyas]?

Kar: No, Jenny wasn't in. There was another woman there.
I forget her name.

Ken: How were you treated there?

Kar: Very well. Very well in the Council. I was very
happy there.

Ken: What role did you play in the council?

Kar: In the A.F. of L., I wasn't there very long before
we had a CIO Council. In the CIO Council, I was
a vice-president.

Ken: Yes. I remember that. By the way, how did the women
feel about your being an organizer?

Kar; Some of the women also wished I was a man. [laughter]
A few times I heard that remark. But I got along.
Somehow or other I convinced them that I could do
as much as a man could do for them.

Ken: What would you say the basic difference in the
problems of organizing were between the New England
states and California?

Kar: In California it was easier because the times were
different, not because I was different. But the
times were different. You see when we were organizing
during that period there was much unemployment and
there was not much turmoil among labor. And when we
came here to California the longshoremen had a strike,
and then we had a different administration. As you
know, Roosevelt was willing to have people organize.
And that sort of brought, among labor, encouragement
to go and organize, to join a union, and work together.
And it was much easier to organize.

Ken: Now in 1929 (I don't know where I read this), the
national A.F. of L. had a national campaign to organize
textile workers by getting the mill owners to accept
the A.F. of L. I think William Green was responsible
for this. And a militant drive was suggested, but
Green didn't go for it. Did this have any relation
to your work on the West Coast?

Kar: No. Not that I know of. It didn't affect me.

Kaross - page 115 - counter 449

Ken: There is one other question about this particular time. Did you - I asked you about the Women's Trade Union League earl~~ier~~er - let's go into the next tape because I want to go into this a little bit.

End of tape

OK
SIB

Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview With Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Wednesday, August 10, 1977, at home
of Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, California

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin, Tape #6 - page 116 - counter #1

Women's Trade Union League - Anita Whitney

Ken: I asked you earlier if you had any contact with the Women's Trade Union League, and you said you hadn't until you came to California. How did you find out about the Women's Trade Union League here?

Kar: From Anita Whitney and some of the other women. I was very friendly with Anita Whitney. We worked together on different issues, and she used to give me a lot of points on California - what she had done and what we could do. I often met her at her home, and she came to my home. I liked her very, very much and was very sorry when she passed away.

Ken: What did you think of Anita?

Kar: I think, coming from a rich family she did a marvelous job. She really was all for the workers and her heart was in the right place for everybody. She was a very generous woman. She donated everything she had practically to the movement.

Ken: How did she help you?

Kar: By giving me a lot of points on how to work with women, which I knew to some extent, but not as deep as she - the whole thing. And she told me what organizations are here and which would be benefit to my work to belong to. ~~One~~ she recommended, I was already a member, the International League [for Peace and Freedom]. I joined practically when it was formed almost, and other groups. And she belonged to the Women's League.

Ken: Did they have a group here?

Kar: Yes. They had a group in San Francisco. I don't know about Oakland.

Ken: Who was in it?

Kar: Well, I couldn't give you names now.

Ken: What kind of women were in it, then?

Kar: They were mainly middle class women. Middle class women like Anita was. Of course Anita was beyond all that. She was a rich woman. But they were middle class women. And there were very few from the workingclass, very few. She had a few, I would say workers, whose husbands were working.

Ken: And what did they do?

Kar: I met very few times with them. I didn't have time.

Kar: I was just wondering whether they participated in any of the labor struggles like they did in New York with the shirtwaist strikers.

Kar: They did, in a lot of labor struggles. I understand at that time the longshoremen were organizing. There were several small strikes besides the big one. And they were helping them too. They were speaking for them, and they helped collect the money to help them.

Ken: If you can think about the names of some of the women that were involved in that I would certainly like to know.

Kar: I'll try, but I can't at the moment.

Ken: OK. It would be interesting to talk to some of those women about what they did.

Now I want to ask you this. When you organized a plant, were the skilled workers usually organized, like this plant where all the Portuguese were working? Were the skilled workers organized?

Kar: No. No organization at all.

Ken: Was this true in most of the plants?

Kar: It was true in all the plants out here. There was no organization. When I organized them the machinists that were there and any other group, they all belonged to the textile. We tried, during negotiations, to get them the wages of the area for their type of work.

Ken: Then it was an industrial form of unionism?

Kar: It was an industrial form of unionism, even before the CIO was formed.

Ken: What contact did you keep with your friends in New England?

Kar: We sort of got disconnected when I came here. First I wrote to several of them, and I used to get an answer now and then of what they were doing. But the work petered out there among the women, I mean. Since then I had no connection.

Depression

Ken: When you came to California, it was in the middle of the depression, after the 1929 crash. In your union work, the AFL during that period was asking for such things as the thirty hour week and fighting wage cuts, what did the textile workers do during this period of the depression?

Kar: They were not organized at the time. We started organization around nineteen thirty three and four.

Ken: Still, the depression was on.

Kar: The depression was on, but the question was of getting more wages and shorter work hours - a forty hour week. But they still worked longer hours, and they wanted a forty hour week. Our textile workers I am talking about. We got it, and anything over forty hours was time and a half.

Ken: What about a division of work? The ILGWU had a program of trying to have division of work. In other words, instead of laying people off - Pregnancy leave

Kar: No. We had none of that. But for the first time I think women were allowed to work during their pregnancy after three months. We had that in the contract, and that they were to be rehired if they wanted to at a certain month, whether it was six months, or three months after the birth of the baby, that they would be permitted to keep their seniority. For the first time I think we got it in any contract around this area.

Ken: How did that come about?

Kar; They were women, and they were all scared to leave their job because of the baby. And they brought up in the union what can we do to keep our jobs, because

Kar: if we go out of the factory for pregnancy the employer doesn't have to rehire us. So we took that up, that seniority was to be kept for a certain amount of months.

Ken: How did the employers react to that?

Kar: They were very angry, but they accepted it, and we had it in all our contracts, in every contract after that that we signed, we had that in. I think it was the first one in this area that had that provision for women.

Unemployed

Ken: What did the union do about the unemployed?

Kar: We couldn't do anything. We tried to have the seniority lists that those that were laid off that they be the first rehired. The union started a union hiring hall in our own unions too, like the longshoremen had. And we fought and we got that in our contract that they had to rehire those that were laid off first. And then if they needed any more they had to hire them by themselves, and they had to join the union within three months. We had a union shop.

Women's Auxiliary

Ken: Oh, during this period you mentioned that you had organized a women's auxiliary?

Kar: Yes. I don't remember the year, but that was prior to my organizing textile workers. Since my husband was a teamster, and teamsters and warehousemen were working together at that time, I happened to know some of the women personally. And I had called them together during one of the strikes of longshoremen at that time, and I made a suggestion, why not organize an auxiliary to help the men. We will have the same thing in the teamsters, and we will have the same thing in the I.L.W.U. So they agreed, and we had several meetings, and I was chairman for a while. And then they started organizing other groups, and I withdrew from that group and left it to them, but I actually organized that group, the group in Oakland.

Ken: Was it the I.L.W.A. [International Longshoremen's

Ken: Association] or the I.L.W.U. [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] It was the I.L.A. until 1934, and later the I.L.W.U.

Kar; I don't - the I?L.W.U.

Ken: Did you also organizer the teamsters?

Kar; No. I didn't get around to the teamsters. They didn't have a strike. When you are talking to women, well you must have an organization to help your men.

Ken: What did the organization do?

Kar: They had meetings. They collected money. At that time they sold something to make money. They had rummage sales. And that was the purpose, during the strike to have a kitchen with coffee and cake and so on. That was the first purpose of that group. Of course later they reorganized it differently. I wasn't in it any more then.

Ken: Where did you get the idea of organizing an auxiliary?

Kar: I had that idea from miners because I was reading a book on the mine workers when Mother Jones was organizing. She had these kitchens. She made the women work. Your men are striking, now you work to help them. I remember reading that, and it was in my mind, why can't the women here help their men too? And I had no idea how to organize, what to do but I thought as we organize we will get the idea of what to do. I wasn't with them very long. I was instrumental in getting them together. I know that.

Helping Longshoremen

Ken: The union you belonged to at this time was the Textile Workers. During the longshore strike, what did your union do for the longshoremen?

Kar: Later on they helped. They even had an assessment when the textile was organized. The first strike, we didn't have textile yet. We weren't organized until '33 or '34, but the I.L.W.U., or the I.L.A. had their strikes prior to that.

Ken: You were organized right after the longshore strike then?

Kar: There were several strikes.

Ken: Not the '34 strike?

Kar: It was around that same time that I started organizing.

Ken: What experiences did you have during the longshore strike?

Kar: When we had already the Textile Workers Union we passed an assessment of fifty cents a month to help the strikers because all unions were supporting them. And we did that too I think for a period of a year or just about a year. Our textile workers making very little money were willing to help. Of course in return the strikes that we had later the I.L.W.U. helped us in every way. We asked them not to go through our picket lines. We asked them for help and we got it from them. We worked very nicely together with the I.L.W.U.

Ken: Where were you during the longshore strike?

Kar: I was here.

Ken: In Oakland?

Kar: Right. And that was the time that we were in the process of organizing textile. It was still in the A.F. of L as you know.

Ken: Were you ever on a longshore picket line?

Kar: Yes! I marched in their parades. They had several parades on various holidays and we had a lot of textile workers marching with them. And I marched in their parades and organized our groups to go with them. You know, to show strength with the I.L.W.U.

Ken: How did your rank and file feel about your association with the I.L.W.U.

Kar: At first - by the way we had a small assessment of twenty five cents to help Harry Bridges during his trial. Am I getting ahead?

Ken: Oh, now. That's all right.

Kar: And the textile, some of them were very much against giving twenty five cents because of the communist issue, so they thought. That's what the government said. However we passed that. And our international finally told us to lay off. You see they were A.F. of L. That was Emil Reieve at that time, and he sent a letter

Kar: that by all means you've got to quit that, so we only paid three or four months.

Ken: Why did the international want you to quit that?

Kar:[We were not supposed to help communists. That's what they said.

Ken: What about the bonus march to Washington. Were you involved in any way in that?

Kar: Yes, in collecting money and helping them, and in speaking on street corners. Here on 9th and Broadway we used to speak night after night on the street corner, some men and women women. Anita and Gertrude Warwick used to come out. And when this march was being organized we spoke there and encouraged the people to help them and go along with them.

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Ken: Outside of your experience in the hop fields and in the prun orchards, what part did you play in the agricultural strikes of the thirties?

Karl The same way, speaking before the people and asking our organizations to donate money. We appealed to them.

Ken: What organizations?

Kar: The women's organizations that I belonged to, the Lithuanian women's organizatiob and also the national group that I belonged to with Anita, and others, various groups, The Women's International League and all these groups were appealed to.

First book

Ken: In 1932 you wrote a book called Women Fighters for Communism. Why did you write it?

Kar: Because I felt that these women were not only fighters for communism, but were fighters for the workingclass as a whole; and I thought it very important that we know them. For instance one of these, Ann Burlak, was from the textile workers. So I felt that a book like that would be very helpful. Some of them were communists and that's why the name of the book. And the reason the name of the book is Women Fighters for Communism is because

Kar: one of the co-writers of that book was from the U.S.S.R. [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics]. She added the section on the U.S.S.R., and I added the section on American women.

Ken: You mean she was over there?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: Who published it?

Kar: It was published in our newspaper, here in the United States.

Ken: The Lithuanian newspaper?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: And then was it reprinted somewhere?

Kar: In the U.S.S.R.

Ken: Do you have any copies of that?

Kar: I have the book in Lithuanian.

Ken: I want to ask more about the book. How much time did it take you to write it?

Kar: It didn't take too long because I had a file on these women already, and I picked up my file and gathered the facts I had on Mother Jones, Mother Bloor, and women of that type.

Ken: Why did you keep files?

Kar: Because I write for the papers. And any articles that I see in the press, I usually cut them out and file them according to what I think I can use them for. I have a lot of files on different people as well as on different subjects that I am interested in.

Ken: How big was this book?

Kar: That's a good point, but I don't remember the pages.

Organization

Ken: OK. I want to ask you this other question. As an organizer, how did you determine what places to organize first?

Kar: It wasn't first. It was what contacts I could get ahold of. I asked everybody. I asked other unions like I.L.W.U., the Furniture Workers (which we were working very well with), and some of the other unions if they know of any textile workers or any textile factories, to give me the contact. And when

Kar: I got a contact naturally I visited them and talked to them and got more contacts from them.

Ken: How did your international influence you?

Kar: They didn't really influence. They were happy when I sent in five hundred applications from the cotton mill. That is the time they gave me the credential to be their International representative. Otherwise they didn't help me too much because they were too far away, in New York. And there were no textile in entire California organized anywhere.

Ken: When the CIO was formed, what was your relation to it then?

Kar: Naturally when the CIO was formed we were very happy because we thought we could organize people, even the balance of the few places that weren't organized. The CIO was going to organize all the unorganized. After that we did organize the bag workers, the burlap bag makers.

Ken: You were still in the AFL then?

Kar: When we started, but we finally completed organization when we were already thrown out of the AFL, our International was thrown out of the AFL. That was 1954 [actually 1937 and 1938].

Ken: What would you say was the difference between the old line AFL officials with whom you worked in New England and the CIO officials with whom you worked in California?

Kar: Those in California were much more progressive, much more broad minded than those I first started working with. They knew nothing about organizing except that the high leaders - the general leaders didn't go into any policy. They didn't think that was important. They [on the West Coast] were different. They thought it wasn't just organizing. We have to be connected through the Legislature in passing certain bills for the benefit of the people, and so on. In those days there was no thought of that. That's what I thought was different. At least I hadn't heard of it [in New England] so much. That's why we started that

Kar: women's committee at that time [in New England] because we thought we could pass some legislation to help labor.

Ken: What was the difference between the AFL and the CIO techniques of organization?

Kar: I don't know too much of AFL techniques because at that time I wasn't working with the AFL, I mean here in California. But they weren't worried about the general masses of people. They were worried about organizing just the skilled workers. And when it came to CIO, later, in organizing, they even convinced the people working in plants where they had skilled workers they should join with the general workers because with only one strike it was easier to get the backing of the people, even for them. And I thought that was a very good technique. And it worked very well.

Ken: Here's a question you have partially answered, and that is how the National Recovery Act affected your organizing.

Kar: It helped quite a bit. We had this Wagner Act. It helped us quite a bit, naturally. When I went to organize in Los Angeles I used that as a talking point, that even the government is allowing you people to organize. And I also went to Eureka and tried to organized there, certain groups. And it helped an awful lot. After I left I understand that it broke down.

Ken: When did you go to Eureka?

Kar: That was during the time I was organizing textile, 1933, 34, something like that/

Ken: How long were you there?

Ken: Just for a week, now and then. I went one week, and then I went again. Then I went to the Pendleton Mills. I tried to help organize those. They had partial organization, and I spoke before them, but I ~~xxxxxx~~ don't know what affect it had. I had this West Coast credential. Somebody found out I had this credential, and they wrote to the joint board asking

Kar: if I would go there, and I did. I went down there for a meeting once. And when I went to Eureka, I went again.

Ken: How were you able to help them?

Kar: By telling them what California is doing, how we are organizing here, and so on. I felt that's what they wanted to know. Then I had to leave, so I didn't attempt to organize them.

Ken: How were you able to help in Eureka?

Kar: In Eureka, there was a strike at the time of the lumber mills.

Ken: Oh, that was a dreadful period.

Kar: I know. I went down there and I - that was the time that the AFL and the CIO were at loggerheads too. And I went there as CIO, of course, as a speaker. They had a meeting. At that time the people asked what friendship we had with Green [William Green, head of the AFL at that time]. I told them nothing, that if it wasn't for textile he would go around naked. [laughter]. And they got a kick out of that. I had more compliments on saying that because everything was made by textile and by union labor. It was a very, I thought, successful meeting, and that was all.

Ken: What local did you belong to? You said there were three locals.

Kar: I belonged officially to the Oakland local, and then they had two other locals in San Francisco.

Ken: What part did you play in local union life?

Kar: I had to meet with all locals. Being in the position I was, I met with every local. And I even met with various shops too when they had shop meetings after work, because they had some kind of trouble they wanted to get rid of; and I had to be there to tell them what to do. You see, I was the business agent of the joint board, plus I was international representative.

Ken: How were you hired to work full time?

Kar: I didn't start working full time until the cotton mill was well organized. I didn't get a penny until that time. And then when the cotton mill was fully organized, that is the time they decided it about time they paid their organizer. And they wanted to pay thirty five dollars a week.

Ken: You mean the cotton mill workers, or

Kar: The whole shop, Local 146, which was the cotton mill. They voted, and then they asked if the other groups would join in with them. And that's the time we formed the joint board.

Ken: Were the other groups organized before you came to town?

Kar: No. I organized all the textile.

Ken: Then the international never paid you at all?

Kar: No. The only money I got was when I sent in, from the Cordage plant, I think there were one hundred and fifty, or something like that, applications. They sent me seventy five dollars, fifty cents per application back. I sent them the full, whatever it was, and they sent me back. That was the only money I ever received before I started to work for the joint board.

Ken: And when you started working for the joint Board?

Kar: I got thirty five dollars, Local 146 voted, and the others agreed.

Ken: And you were international representative without pay?

Kar: But if I went anywhere, like Los Angeles, they paid my fare, and at that time they paid the joint board for my time.

Ken: What about your per diem?

Kar: Yes, they paid that.

Ken: Here's where I'm confused. With all the reading I've done I can't figure what happened. Emile Rieve and the textile workers went into the CIO. All the textile workers went into the CIO. What was the textile workers organizing committee?

Kar: That was before they were put out of the AFL. They had an organizing committee, Dubinsky, Rieve, and many

Kar: other international unions where there was a group of workers, and they organized an organizing committee which they called. It wasn't called textile. It was a committee to organize general workers.

Second side of tape

Counter #1

Ken: Was that the thing Hillman was in charge of?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: The Amalgamated Clothing Workers gave a lot of money to the textile workers. Here's a question I have written out, so I will read it: What opinion did you have of Hillman's program to place a constructive program before the employers of minimum wages and shorter hours to eliminate conflict between the various branches of the industry in cotton, silk, wool, fibre, etc.

Kar: The program was very good, but it didn't peter out. The employers didn't go for it, and they broke up into groups. Certain groups accepted it. Others did not. It was a good program on the whole.

Ken: He had a lot of foreign language organizers. Did he ever approach you?

Kar: No.

Ken: Did this program have any effect in California?

Kar: No.

Ken: What affect did the strikes, the victories and the losses in the East, have on California?

Kar: The losses, I don't know. But any victories, we brought these before the employers and showed them, look these people got so much and we want so much too. It helped us. Every gain that the union made we brought that up to the employers.

Ken: Did you ever go to a training school for trade unionists?

Kar: No.

Ken: Were there any around?

Kar: Yes, I knew there was one inn San Francisco, but how

Kar: much it did, or what it did, I don't know. I had no time anyway.

Ken: The Amalgamated sent a lot of people to school.

Kar: I know they did.

Ken: How did you develop rank and file leadership in the union?

Kar: By talking to them. When we started the union here nobody knew what to do, and we had to elect a shop steward. I picked the one that was more bright who worked in a particular department. I said, "Now, look, I want to talk to you. You could be a very good shop steward." And told them what to do; that people would come with questions, or if there was something wrong that they didn't live up to the contract or something. "If you don't want to talk to the boss, you come to me and tell me about it, and I'll come." "And later on you will develop that you'll probably want to do it yourself." So that way they accepted, and we developed them.

I tried not to push anybody, because if you do then they get scared and don't want to be. They get scared of the boss. The boss might threaten or something. But you have to go around them. And I was able to get very good shop stewards committees everywhere.

Ken: What about in the union itself?

Kar: What do you mean?

Ken: I mean at union meetings, like developing people for chairman or recording secretary, or secretary of the union.

Kar: That wasn't hard in some ways. We would take people who were more able, or who had more education. Usually it was the girls that were secretaries of our union - the three locals that I had because they had more education. And knowing that I would say, "Wouldn't you people like to have such and such a person because she can do good writing and keep the books." And the people would go and elect. Then they would get scared and don't want to accept. I would say, "Well, you take it for a month

Kar: and try it. I'll show you how and ~~xxxxxxx~~ out." And we had very good secretaries and developed very good leadership in^{all} our locals.

Finally in the Central Labor Council here had meetings and I asked certain people if they would accept and we would nominate them at the meeting to go to the Central Labor Council to hear what the other unions are doing. So we elected from various locals the limit we could send from each local. And we saw that they attended. If some of them failed and didn't want to attend, or couldn't attend, then we elected somebody else, and we had very good attendance from textile. And we learned a lot that way.

Ken: What about union executive boards?

Kar: We developed very good executive boards in each local. They were able to carry on the local. You see I was gone quite a few times in various places. I went to Los Angeles for instance several times, two or three weeks at a time. And they had their meetings and they had grievances and all that, and they did very well. And these people were never unionized or organized, so I thought I had a very good group.

Ken: This is an awfully leading question, but I don't know how else to put it. Did you pay particular attention to women and minorities?

Kar: In the locals, we didn't have any trouble because they were working together, different nationalities. There were Portuguese, there were Spanish and during world war two a lot of Black women came in. We never had any before. And they were accepted. Nothing was ever said. In fact I had a Black woman as a shop steward. I had women on the executive board and Black men too. But they were mostly, all the committees were women mainly because the majority of the workers were women. We had no racial trouble.

Ken: What methods did you use to make the union meetings interesting?

Kxxx

Kar: We had a discussion at each meeting what the shop stewards has found hard to adjust in their department. And it was interesting. Then we had a discussion how to do it. Otherwise we just accepted what they said. That's how we worked. We had interesting meetings. Very interesting meetings.

Ken: How did the members get involved in these meetings?

Kar: By backing up their shop stewards if they had trouble in any department. First of all that department's members would speak, and then the local would back them up.

Ken: Did you have grievance committees?

Kar: The grievance committee was the top committee of the local that had to go before the boss. We had a committee like that. Yes.

Ken: What other committees did you have?

Kar: We didn't have many committees - just the grievance committee, and the local meeting itself and if they had any subject beside the grievances they brought it up before the local.

Ken: I notices there was an awful lot of sports activities going on -

Kar: We had a little. In fact in Local 146 they had a ball [base] team, and a bowling team for several years only, and it petered out after a while.

Ken: What did you think of the union being involved in sports?

Kar: I think it's good. But first of all you have to look where you are having your bread and butter. That's my opinion. If you've got time, go into other branches. That's the way I used to tell them. If you can have both and if people are happy over it, that's good.

Ken: What part did research play in your organizing in California.

Kar: What research?

Ken: Well, I noticed in the paper that Virginia Woods was research director for the CIO and there was a lot of research done before certain unions went before the employers on how much money the employers made, and stuff like that; and I wondered what part that played

Ken: in your negotiations.

Kar: It didn't play too much. I think there was only one occasion that I went to the CIO Research Department. I asked them to find out a certain pay rate in an Eastern shop and compare it to ours. Otherwise I got my own through the Textile Union. I got my own figures, whatever I needed, when I went into negotiations with the employers.

Ken: What help did you get ^{from} your International in negotiations?

Kar: That's what I mean, their research department. And of course when we were going on strike we had to get the OK from the international. We had to explain to them why and that we were unable not only to get what we want, but we weren't even near. The employers wouldn't even listen to us. At times the international would send a letter to the employers stating that their research showed so and so. And they helped several times like that.

Ken: You had to go to the international to get agreement to strike?

Kar: Yes, also to the Council [Central Labor Council].

Ken: What if you didn't get it?

Kar: The people would have struck, probably, anyway. [laughter] And they knew that so they gave us the OK.

Ken: What did it mean for the international to give you permission to strike? Did they help you.

Kar: They probably would help. You see, the international was never too rich because they had these Southern mills which had thousands of workers. And a strike there meant emptying the treasury of the international pretty much. And these little places of several hundred people meant very little, probably, to the international, so we didn't expect too much help from them. We never got any. We lived on our own.

Ken: You did so many things that I'm not asking you specific questions about plants. So what I am doing is asking you some questions generally. What about the workers health here. Was there brown lung in this area?

Kar: No. If there was, it was never taken up, and it was not known, even to the workers. The only place that was bad was at first in the cotton mill when they had a certain type of weaving here. And a few months after we organized that type of work went out, and they didn't have a very bad lint problem in the mill. And in the other mills like the rope factory, that didn't have very much. We didn't have brown lung here on the coast.

In the eastern cotton mills where they make the fine fabric they had an awful lot of lint which caused the people to get lung trouble, especially younger women. They got T.B. those days. But here it wasn't that bad. The curtain mills, they didn't have that problem. None of the factories had very bad problems. Of course there were some. There was always something. We could always find something. But it wasn't bad.

Ken: You had some health problems?

Kar: That's right. We had a few, and they tried to correct those.

Ken: What were they?

Kar: For instance, a couple of the factories didn't have enough air, clean air, because the windows were tightly closed. I mean they were built that way. So finally they installed a few blowers and things of that sort.

Ken: How did you get them to do it?

Kar: They did it willingly. It wasn't much of an expense, I guess. That's why.

Ken: Was the slow down method ever used?

Kar: No. We didn't have any of that, except the one sit down strike.

Ken: How much action was initiated by the workers on the job, outside of this one sit down strike? Did they want a strike?

Kar: Many a time they did. In the bag factories that we organized, every negotiation that we held, and we had them yearly, (we didn't want contracts longer than a year because being a new organization we didn't know what's going to happen next year. Maybe nationally

Kar: there would be much more wages negotiated, and we wanted it. So we weren't going to sign up this year to tie up the next year). So we had a yearly contract and at times we did have a little trouble on that score, but not very much.

Ken: What about conditions on the job?

Kar: Conditions. We always had - where the shop stewards brought these up and we tried to negotiate them with the employers. If the shop steward couldn't do it (they had to go in first) and if they couldn't settle it they called on me. I would go in there. And if I couldn't settle it we let a local committee go in.

Ken: Let's see now. I got the story of the cotton mill. How did you handle strikes generally. I mean what type of organization took place?

Kar: Whenever we had a strike, first of all we organized all the leadership of the local, like the shop stewards. They had to organize their departments into picketing - so many people each day. They had to take care of that. And if certain departments were short because someone took sick, or some couldn't go out, then we appealed to the local and other departments to help, the bigger departments. We had pretty good organization that way, to keep going.

Ken: What was the longest strike you had in this area?

Kar: The cotton mill strike for four months here. It was a very long strike and the people were very poor. It was a hard strike.

Ken: When was this?

Kar: This was about six months after we organized.

Ken: In other words you had to strike to get your first contract?

Kar: Right.

Ken: How did you handle that strike?

Kar: That strike was supported by labor here. We appealed to the Central Labor Council. And many of the storekeepers around (they lived off these people) In those days they had little stores. One had a little grocery, and one had a little bakery, and another a little meat market. And those stores were suffering because the people

Kar: couldn't buy, and they probably couldn't pay their bills when they did buy something. So these storekeepers helped. We had a soup kitchen organized by the people. And these little stores, they gave us food, they gave us meat bones, and the women made soup and all that. We had a hard time. But they pulled out and they got a very good contract, and they were very, very happy.

Ken: How did you get publicity for this strike?

Kar: I had publicity which was very good. I appealed through the radio here. I went before the committee and they gave me time. And we got quite a bit of help at that time. And then the employers spoke after that. [laughter] You know, rebuttal. And I rebutted and I don't think it hurt.

Ken: What foreign language groups helped?

Kar: Mostly their own people, the Spanish people, because the majority were Spanish at the time, and the Portuguese people. They helped a lot - those that were working in other industries, their relatives and friends. The people suffered because they never could save much money on what they were making. And there was piece work in the mill, where you had to beat your own average. I forget what they called that. I forget things.

Ken: So do I.

Kar: They had a name for it. So you had to beat your own system, and in the end you couldn't do it. You only could do so much. So the new worker would do it. So during the strike we did away with that. That was the main thing. It wasn't so much the money, it was that type of piece work. And they never had piece work again in that factory.

Ken: At that time you weren't being paid either?

Kar: No. But my husband worked.

Ken: How did you organize the curtain factories.

Kar: As I told you, I organized one, and the others by just maneuvering.

Ken: Oh, I thought those were in San Francisco?

Ken: In October, 1937, when the AFL convention kicked out the CIO, a special appeal was made to the textile

Ken: workers to stay in the AFL.

Kar: I don't know of any special appeal. I know one of the first ones to be kicked out was the Amalgamated and the ~~T~~extile. I don't remember any special appeal.

Ken: I'll read it to you because I've got a quote here:

It berated Hillman and said of him - -

"...we cannot believe that the membership of the U.T.W. can approve the action..a treasury confiscated, a constitution torn to shreds, officers driven to abdicate..a union demolished.." Referred to Hillman as Machiavelli. *

Do you remember any of that?

Kar: I don't think they wanted them to stay. That's the time that they accused them of that. They wanted to throw them out along with the other unions. It was no cinch for them to keep Textile against Amalgamated. Amalgamated was more skilled. Textile was really unskilled. They didn't want Textile. Something is wrong there. I don't get that.

Ken: I guess I got mixed up . I probably got it wrong. You belonged to the Central Labor Council in San Francisco when the AFL kicked the CIO out. I want to ask ahead of time what you did in the Central Labor Council.

Kar: I was just a delegate from Textile. That was all. I went to meetings and listened and voted and so on, but I had no special assignment.

Ken: Were you at the meeting when the CIO people were asked to leave?

Kar: yes.

Ken: Tell me about it.

Kar: Well, we all walked out. We weren't sorry. We were all happy that we were immediately going to organize a CIO council.

Ken: Was there any trouble that night?

Kar: No. No trouble. We walked out laughing and weren't a bit sorry.

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*Quote either from Mary Heaton Vorst's Labor's New Millions or Bernstein's, The Lean Years .

Ken: Were you asked to leave?

Kar: We were told that this is the last meeting with you people. You are not members of our organization any more. So we walked out. We didn't even wait for the meeting to end. Some stayed, but the majority of us walked out. Others stayed to see what was going to go on. They knew they would have to leave. They stayed to see. They organized their own group and we organized ours. We we had our own council.

Ken: Were you a representative to the new Council?

Kar: Yes. Later on I was elected on committees, the organizing committee, and then later I was elected as a vice president of the Council, the San Francisco Council.

Politics

Ken: In 1936 the Labor's Non Partisan League was organized for initiating legislation and fighting for labor's rights. What part did you play in Labor's Non Partisan League?

Kar: I didn't play a very big part in that. I was very busy at the time. But I supported it. I was for it. And I brought in reports that I received to the meeting. And we had discussion in the Council. So of our Council members didn't go for it because they thought it was a communist group.

Ken: How do you feel about labor being involved in politics?

Kar: I believe that they should because without politics what can you get these days? It isn't only what you can get from the bosses, but what you can get in legislation to support you. And that's politics.

Chinese Workers

Ken: Were there any Chinese in your locals at all?

Kar: Yes, in the curtain industry.

Ken: I was just wondering what the attitude of people towards the Chinese was during that period. You know the past history of labor in California was sort of anti-Chinese. Was that reflected in any way in -

Kar: No. They were very nice people. And I know one of them was a shop steward. She was elected by all of them.

Kar: I think they were young people. They didn't even realize what was in the past. They were young people and they accepted each and every one. They were all young people, a young group. Young women

Ken: This problem you had with the young women. You mentioned young girls - in New England the young girls always said they were going to get married. Was that a problem out here?

Kar: No. The times were already different. The women were realizing that, especially during the war period and just prior to the war, that they are in to stay. And there hasn't been a problem like that any more.

Ken: The next question I am going to ask you is going to take a long time. We are almost at the end of the tape. We are getting to Gantner and Mattern now, and your problem with Jenny Matyas, and I think that is going to take quite a long time. zIt's a long story. We only have about five more minutes.

End of tape

OK SK
10/13/77

Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Thursday, August 25, 1977, at home
of Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin, tape #7 - page 139 - counter #1

Ken: There are a few questions I want answered before we get into it. When I was typing your transcript these came up in my mind. Did you know any minority women before you came to California? Mexican women or Black Women?

Kar: No, I didn't.

Ken: How did you react to working with them and knowing them when you got here?

Kar: Was very happy to work with them because I always thought that they should come in more, into the movement. And especially when we worked here in California Cotton Mill, most of them were Portuguese women. And then later, during the war, the Black women came in. And they were very, very good - those I had, and I was very happy to work with them.

Ken: Were they happy to work with you?

Kar: I am sure they were because they all cooperated in every way they could.

Ken: What did you know about their particular problems?

Kar: I don't know what to say about their problems. They came here from the South, most of them, during the war because they wanted a warmer climate and they felt there were more jobs here in California. And their problem naturally was they had big families, and they worked hard, and their husbands had either a poor paying job, so they had to work. As far as I know they - when they had to pay dues they would run behind and they would say, "Gee, we can't pay this month. " They had to pay for this or that. "You know, my husband doesn't make much."

Kar: They were hard up women, or they wouldn't have worked in the cotton mill.[laughter] They would have shopped around.

Ken: Oh, another thing. What contact did you have with the houseworkers after the group split up?

Kar: After it split up I had very little contact because I started to organize the cotton mills, and naturally I lost contact with.

But I started in 1934, I organized the women's auxiliary of the ILWU here in Oakland. And I tried to organize a Teamsters auxiliary, but they were a hard nut to crack. And it just petered out. I had a few, and we were going to call them together and we never got around to organizing a Teamster's auxiliary, and they have never had one since, to this day.

But the ILWU kept theirs. They organized one in San Francisco, and they did a splendid job during the strike.

And right after that I had a job. I knew two Lithuanian women who had worked in houses [doing housework] and they knew a few others. And I went to the Y.W.C.A. [Young Women's Christian Association]. We put out a leaflet and left it there, and it had our telephone. And finally we had a group of maybe about thirty five women. Most of them were Black. So we had meetings, and we paid something like, I don't know, twenty five cents a month in dues to get out more leaflets and for telephones and so on. A

And it was very interesting, our meetings. They told how hard they worked, how the housewives were on their neck all the time. And they felt the need very much to organize. They wanted better conditions, more money, and better food, those that worked, stayed in and ate there. So we began to think about this conference that was coming.

Ken: Oh yes, I got the story of how you went to the AF of L Convention.

Kar: We had a very, very good group. So after that

Kar: when the AFL didn't do anything, we just fell apart. And then I started organizing textile and what money there was we donated to something and we had a treasury of maybe five or six dollars at that time.

Ken: The other question was - when you were working in the hop fields, were you considered an itinerent worker? I mean, how many people worked that lived there and how many people that just came in for the season?

Kar: Well, most of them came in for the season because the cars were parked there all around the field. And I came with an old couple that lived in the same building and they used to go every year. So they took me down. I wouldn't have known about it. So, when I got down there I noticed these organizers coming around. And I asked them if I could help distribute leaflets. And I had thought of organizing even before I went because these old people told me the whole story of how they have to buy their groceries right there from the owner of the field. And how they couldn't even leave the fields while they were there unless they had an emergency. They didn't want them to carry out, I guess, any thing of what is going on there. So they had to just stay there until they finished the season, and then they left.

I was there, and the first time I stayed six weeks without getting out of there.

Ken: Did you ever know the people from the town that worked there too?

Kar; No. We didn't know any of these people.

Ken: I just wondered if there was any conflict between the people in the town and you people there.

Kar: Who organized the vigilantes and how they came, I don't know. But we had several meetings there in the evening right out in the fields. And there must have been somebody who either carried to the employers, or the employers themselves were there, and

Kar: so they got in touch with these vigilantes who came out the first night just scaring the people. They had white robes on, not the hoods of the Klu Klux Klan, but just white sheets over them. They screeched and screamed ~~akk~~ around our camp.

And we didn't have bedding in which to stay. We stayed right out in the open. We slept at night under the trees.

Then the second night, at midnight I'd say, them came out. And that's the time they burned the cross there. And they told that anybody that starts organizing, we hear, anybody that's a dirty old red, we're going to burn them like this cross. So naturally the people were scared, and it was impossible to organize.

Another reason it was hard at that time. We didn't know how to cope with it about organizing was that they claimed when the six weeks are over they are going to be somewhere else and how can they belong to anything because they don't know where, or how far, or what they are going to do. Because they travel from place to place to work. And that was an awful hard nut to crack.

And I was so happy when this organizing of farm workers began several years ago now because now I think they are more stable.

Ken: That's true. I was just ~~was~~ wondering about that because I wondered whether the people from the town were anxious to belong to a union or not.

Kar: Well, naturally they were not because those that lived there was not those people that came to work there.

Picking hops were mostly the older people I noticed. There were several women with children in the group that I was in. And these children worked all day too. The hops would fall off. Because they were dry they would fall off the vine, and the children would pick them up from the ground and put them in the box or the basket that we had. And all

Kar: day long we were right there. Their mothers's were pushing them. "You will rest after a while. Now just pick those up." And one woman had a baby. She had him in a makeshift crib under a tree. Then once in a while she would run over there and look at it and come back and work.

And they made so little that they just made a living. They didn't make anything over. I know I came back after six weeks, and I didn't even have ten dollars because I had to buy the food there. And we made only a cent a pound. And they are dry. You know what they are. So we would pick a big bag of them and we wouldn't even make ten cents. You have to pull them out and not pick any leaves. You have to pick them clean. If a leaf falls, you have to pick it up. And you know to pick a pound of that takes time.

Just before I left that week, they agreed to pay a cent and a half. So finally they did get scared. And ours wasn't the only place the vigilantes came after. There was other, another part of the same area. So I guess the employers did get scared that theywon't finish picking. So that they did give us a cent and a half.

Ken: Now there's another question here. When you were put in jail and Earl Warren ruled that your bail would be considered your fine, was this done on purpose?

Kar: I think so - to scare the people ~~bail~~ing us out. You see I had a hard time with the party that did bail me out. And he was just a working man. He had a wife and himself. And he came and put up one hundred and fifty dollars. Naturally I paid him back. But I felt bad about it.

Ken: You paid him back personally?

Kar: Personally because they didn't have enough money in the International Labor Defense which were defending us at that time.

Ken: I thought it might have been a policy on the part of the -

Kar: I think it was policy. They thought that if they take the bail maybe we will quiet down.

Ken: Did you.

Kar: No. [laughter]

Ken: Now, on the last tape - when you got pregnancy leave for women, how did you let the other unions know about this? You broke the ice on this, so how did you get this information to other unions so they could do the same thing?

Kar: We brought it up to the Labor Council, the AF of L Labor Council, at the time. Later, the CIO Council. And they had the same policy to wherever women worked to try to get the leave for women. And they were very proud that the textile were the first ones that got it in their contract.

Ken: This struck me too. You spoke on street corners a lot. Looking back, did this help any?

Kar: I think it did very much. A lot of people joined, at that time, the International Labor Defense.

Elaine [Black] was the head at that time. And I think it helped in general. It helped to make the people understand what is needed. At that time Anita Whitney and Gertrude Warwick were speakers, and myself. And there were a couple of men, but there were more women as speakers on the corners.

Ken: Why was this?

Kar: I don't know. We used to divide up at nights when we would be there to speak. It used to be about seven thirty in the evening, and we would gather on the corner. And the people knew. It seems like the crowd would be waiting. When we got there to the corner immediately the circle would come around.

One time there was a fight among the people - not because of us. It was among the listeners. They were people that ~~were~~^{were} drinking or something. So the police arrested them. But they didn't interfere, no matter what we said.

Ken: What did you say?

Kar: We spoke on general labor conditions in this country, and that they should be better; that they should join unions and should protest; join protest marches. Marches were starting up, different marches.

Ken: Oh, the hunger marches?

Kar: Right. And, of course, mainly during that period we spoke on the question of either work or wages. That many of these young people haven't got jobs - older people are let out of jobs. Some people were starving. And the country is rich enough to either give work or pay wages. Then if you don't work because there are no jobs - and I think that the whole thing eventually brought out employment compensation and brought out later on social security. So that helped.

Ken: On the cotton mill strike I never did find out how the Central Labor Council, the AF of L Central Labor Council, help you.

Kar: To tell the people not to become strike breakers - to see that their friends kept away. Because the company immediately started a campaign to get strikebreakers. Eventually they brought in five hundred people. I don't know where they picked them up. They brought in that many people and they filled the jobs of all those that were on strike in that mill. And these people could not produce because they were not textile people. They didn't know anything about machines. They didn't know how to work them. And the company kept them. And then the Central Labor Council helped issue a leaflet that these strikebreakers are not going to break the backbone of the strike. And I remember that that was the heading. ~~And~~

And the people were very good although the Portuguese and the other people that worked there were fooled a couple of times by would be organizers. Yet they kept up pretty good. They didn't go back. None of those people went back to scab, none of them.

Ken: Were there any hassels between the strikebreakers and the strikers?

Kar: Yes. There were quite a few hassels, and the women would organize, ^{because the majority were women,} they would organize early in the morning when they were bringing in the scabs and they would wait on the corner. And of course there were lights on the corner, and as the red light would go on they would all knock the car over [laughter]. And that was done time and again. Many a time the police were that good that they turned their backs. They didn't see until it was over, because they were there and the car would be ^{they would organi} overturned. And they did that time and again. Maybe once a week, twice a week, all the women would come out and stand around there. And the minute the red light would go on and they know the car is coming in they would just jump over there and overturn those cars.

Ken: What did you have to do with that? Were you completely innocent?

Kar: Of course. [laughter]/ ^{we}
We couldn't say ~~xxxxxxx~~ organized that. But they were very happy to do it, those women. They thought they were saving their jobs, which they did.

Eventually they would not have accomplished anything, the company, on account of they didn't know their job. You have to know the job. [the scabs]

But I just want to add a little bit on this. That all those meat markets and little stores (they didn't have those big stores that they have now. They were all small businesses). And all those small businesses contributed to the soup kitchen. We had a soup kitchen there on Twenty-third avenue. And we got it rent free from the owner. And anything that was brought over was used up in that soup kitchen, or was given to the people to take home because they didn't have much. They earned so little. And they lived in those little houses around there, most of the people.

And then I remember, my husband, for instance, and some of the other people when the strike was going on,

Kar: they used to go to the country and shoot rabbits and bring those in. And the people would make stew or whatever they could out of the meat of the rabbits. And if anybody else had anything, they would bring it there. So they kept it up. And the strike was four months in duration. And by the time it was over the people were very, very much hard up.

Finally, when we did return, the demand was that the scabs be out. Well, the company argued over that; that some of them they had obligations to keep, and so on. And we finally agreed to a certain amount of them, that they could stay provided they re-employed all those [strikers]. Of course some of them already [scabs] left out of that group - got better jobs and so on. But they agreed that they would not discriminate against any [stri~~x~~kers], take them all back, and they will keep some of those scabs.

So what happened after that, one by one these scabs had to leave because those people were not told what to do. But they used to watch those people [scabs] come in, and where they put their lunches, ^{bring} They would ~~xxx~~ probably a mouse from a trap or something, and change with whatever they had in their lunch bags [laughter]. Finally they all had to quit. I think out of the entire group there were two who stayed a longer time and they became very good union people. All the rest left, five hundred. So we had quite a time there. That was the only strike where we had the hardest time. We had more activity than anywhere else because the people were very active in it.

Ken: How many people from other unions came by your picket line?

Kar: They did. They helped. In fact the teamsters helped. They did a splendid job that time because the ILWU were busy, very busy. The teamsters, I think because they had more time. My husband was a teamster so he got the Teamsters Union to come in. They did quite a lot of picketing. They stopped all the big trucks

Kar: coming in. They did a splendid job. This is one time that the teamsters were really doing work. Then from the other unions, we had once a week a big picket line where the other unions would help out, Those that were not working would come in and help us on the picket line. So we had quite a few.

Ken: How much money did you get from other unions?

Kar: We didn't get too much money. In fact, we didn't go for money because we had enough food. Except for issuing leaflets occasionally and for transportation or something like that we needed - outside of that we didn't need any money. So we didn't get too much money. We didn't go for it. But some of the unions did donate. I don't remember how much. It was several hundred dollars altogether. Otherwise we didn't have much, and we didn't need it. We got help outside of that.

The people - we weren't paying them anything, but they lived through it and did very well. And they were very happy people. And when the strike was finished they had a big dance that they arranged. I forget where the hall is now. It was a Portuguese hall. It was donated. And the musicians came voluntarily. And they had a dance there, and they were very happy winning the strike.

Ken: This is just a general question because I don't know whether you ever came across the problem or not, but there were women during the period you organized who had a good college education and there were a lot of women from the working class who probably never got a grade school education. Was there any problem of organizing women from one class or another - what was the difference?

Kar: There wasn't. We didn't have that - not in that type of work in the places I was organizing. In the cotton mills, all that worked were not educated. And then when I organized the shops in San Francisco it was the same thing. The small shops like the cordage factory, well that had mostly men. But the curtain factory - there were just young girls. Well, some were older, but most of them were young girls who were there working to get -

Kar: They had to work. Their family needed them. Then the bag factories - most of them were Spanish speaking, and many of the women that came in later, Black women, and they were not educated at all. I dealt mostly with an uneducated group of women.

Ken: Well, here's a question that ties up with that a little bit. You knew a lot of people in the left wing movement. You were involved in it too, and there was sort of a cult of worshipping the brawny working man. There was a worship of the working person. Were you treated differently by people in the movement than women in the movement who, say, had a higher education?

Kar: Not that I felt it. I didn't feel that. If I had to go to some kind of a meeting where I was asked to speak before them, I think I was on their level. Most of my work, my speaking and everything was among a group that was not educated.

Ken: That's really not what I mean, and I am trying to figure out whether they sort of hero worshipped you because you came from the ranks of the workingclass.

Kar: No. I don't think so. I did not feel that way those days.

Ken: Because a lot of times it worked the other way too. they would talk about a person, "Oh, he's an intellectual". And they would put him down because he was an intellectual. And I thought maybe the reverse thing -

Kar: No. I had no feeling of that - nowhere. I felt equal both ways whether I went among the workers or I went among the more educated groups speaking. I thought I was treated equally. And I didn't feel any superiority or inferiority.

Ken: OK, let's get back to -How well did you know Emil ~~Rxxxx~~ Rieve?

Kar: I knew Emil Rieve through some personal contacts I had with him when he came here a couple of times, and at conventions. But not too well. I knew much better Pollock who was the secretary. He came here and he stayed one time when we had a little trouble.

Ken: Wait a minute. We are almost at the end of the tape.

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Ken: You knew Pollack better than Rieve then?

Kar: Yes. I knew him much better. He stayed here to help us once. We had to draw up some contracts and we had a big meeting coming up. He stayed here a couple of weeks and I got very well acquainted with him. And we talked a lot on organizing and what could be done, what ~~we~~^{more} could do on the Pacific Coast. And he was very, very helpful, a very nice person. He helped.

Rieve was more standoffish. He was harder to come to and ask questions. He would just blurt out an answer. So I never got very well acquainted with him. He was an old man too. Pollack was a much younger person.

Ken: Did he come up from the ranks?

Kar: Yes, he came up from the ranks. He used to say that he was a worker all his life and he came from the working ranks.

Rieve was more or less an intellectual. He came from Old Russia. And he was a Socialist in Russia, and I guess he was a socialist here. He didn't say yes, and he didn't say no. I don't know. But I had a feeling he was. Pollock was not. He was a Democrat. I know when he was here he was campaigning for the Democratic Party. And he asked us to vote for people at our meeting because he thought they would help textile labor. He was interested in helping textile on account of being secretary. He was a very, very nice person.

Ken: OK. Now we are going to get to this business of Jennie Matyas. She said she took an organizing job from Dubinsky on the basis that she wouldn't have to work with communists. She wanted to do educational work. What do you think of that?

Kar: Well, I wouldn't know. I didn't know her then.

Ken: I already asked you if you knew Rose Pesotta, and you said no. That's Rose Pesotta of the ILGWU in Los Angeles.

Kar: No.

Ken: Why do you think Chinatown was never organized by the ILGWU?

Kar: That was a hard nut to crack. That's what other organizers

Kar: told me when I was in the Labor Council at the time - that you are taking on something that you will never get anywhere with because you cannot do it. It's private industries in private homes, and you will not be able to do it. So that gave me an idea that when Roosevelt [James] was here I would bring it out to him by publicizing that, whether we couldn't do something [this was in 1958] He was here as a Congressional Committee member. So when he came here I thought that I would bring that out. Personally I went trying to get a job there. I was working in the Textile [union]. But I thought, well if I can get a job in one of these places maybe I'll be able to do something or bring out more facts.

I knew where the stores were, where they were working, what alleys there were, what barns and sheds where these women were working. I found this out from various women. And I would walk right in without even knocking. And the floorlady would ask what I wanted. And I would tell her, "I am looking for a job." So, one of the places, they offered me a job if I would come next Monday. That was Friday. So I asked them what I would do before I took the job. So she showed me that I would fold little hankies or something like that. So I said OK, and in the meantime do I have to bring lunch. I kept asking questions. Do I have to bring my lunch, or can I go out for lunch. I wanted to find out more what they were doing there. There were sewing machines all over the place. And that's where I saw a baby in a crib next to a woman, in a basket on the floor.

And I think she was suspicious, the floorlady, because I looked, and when I walked out of there, I said, "OK, I will be here Monday." And she said "OK." I came by Monday and she said "No. We got somebody else who is experienced." So I got no job.

And I went to a couple of other places like that. I would walk in. Some of them were locked. You couldn't

Kar: get in. You had to knock. And then the floorlady or somebody would come out and say "What do you want?" And I would say "I am looking for a job." No jobs - we will let you know if you want to leave your address. And they would stick out a paper for me to sign.

So that is how I found out. I had a chance to talk to one of these women. One time I went around four o'clock and she was leaving. I asked her questions. I said, "Don't get scared. I just want to know because I am looking for a job myself." So she told me a lot of these facts that I brought out.

In fact, that's the same way I was organizing textile. Here in Oakland where the produce market is the second floor was all sewing. So I got a job in one of them sewing on baby garments. So I took it. I worked a few days thinking I am going to get contact with some of these people and organize them. In that little shop where I worked they were paying less than a dollar an hour, about eighty or eighty five cents. I told them I was experienced, that I could run a sewing machine. I told them I didn't work on baby garments but I could run a sewing machine. So they needed a sewing machine operator and I was taken on.

So while I was working there I noticed everything and I guess I talked too much. Anyway I was there three days and finally I decided I couldn't do very much. I asked one other union organizer from the joint board to come one noon time and distribute leaflets because I wasn't going to work there. I just had a job to get in. And so he said he would, and then didn't come up with the leaflets. So naturally I got angry. So I didn't go in again. But I couldn't get a contact. These women somehow were afraid to talk too much for one reason or another. It seems like the factory itself was not that bad. And the floorlady was watching everybody, walking the aisles up and down. But she didn't say very much. The people couldn't talk at all when they were working. That was forbidden. She told me later, "If you want to know anything, ask me." So I had to keep my mouth shut. And right after work I got out as soon

Kar: I could, and I tried to catch up with them, and they didn't talk much. I had a hard time. I decided I couldn't organize them. They had, say, less than fifty working there. I gave up when this man didn't come with the leaflets.

Ken: There is this theory that the lower the pay is the less militaht people are. Is that true?

Kar: I think the cotton mill had very low pay, ^(lowest in the area) and yet they were very militant once they had a chance. Some are afraid they may lose their job, such as it is. That was my opinion later on.

Ken: Let's see. Let's get down to Gantner and Mattern then. I've got some stuff here about the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union]. I'll go into that some other time. I have read Jennie Matyas' oral history at Bancroft, and she said that when she was in New York in 1937 a woman from the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] signed people from Gantner and Mattern up in her [the cio woman's] union. She said that the ILG had permitted the Textile Workers Union to use their hall and the people from Gantner and Mattern came in droves, and that the women "had signed them up because she promised them the sky". And I am sure that that woman was you. Now I am going to read this into the text: "Dubinsky got word of this..I got a plane and came back..I found workers demanding unattainable conditions...I succeeded in getting a meeting with the employers...
"Well, it was a terrific situation to persuade workers who were led to believe that they could get anything by going on strike for it, to get them to agree to accepting more realistic possible basis...we finally got an agreement..it wasn't anything I would have recommended in a situation other than this.....

"Of course I had a problem with this girl from the textile workers, who I am fairly sure was a Communist. She was working terribly against the ILG and against me as a representative. She steamed up the workers to insist

Ken: on more and more. I almost didn't get the workers to accept the agreement..." OK, tell me what happened, really.

Kar: Some of the people from Gantner and Mattern came up to the union meeting. And after the meeting they raised the question, could we organize Gantner and Mattern. That shop was there quite a while, and nobody's ever organized it, and they would like a union. So immediately I told them I would be very glad if they would help me in distributing leaflets if they want that, or spreading the word, and getting a meeting.

So we stayed after the meeting and talked to them, a couple of us, the union officials. And we talked to them and they agreed that they would come on a certain date if we would wait for them after work. So we did. And at that time, at the first meeting, there were about thirty five or forty people came. And naturally they wanted a union. So I gave them our cards and they signed up. And they wanted to know if I can organize them. And I said, "Certainly, I'll try." They said they think they would belong to another union. I said in that case sign up anyway. If it is going to be another union, I will turn them over if you want to. otherwise you can - and they said, "We would like to be with this union since we heard about it, and we were talking about it. And we know that you have organized other shops and the people are happy." I said "Well, we'll see about it." I wasn't sure myself. I said, "We'll see about it, but sign up anyway, and we'll have the meetings and we'll see what happens."

I think in a couple of weeks the whole shop almost signed up. And that's the time. I think that's the time I sent the contract, but they worked out the contract themselves with assistance from myself and some other union people that were there, what we could ask in the first agreement. And it was no sky. It was a certain amount of money. I have forgotten now so I can't tell you how much raise in pay. And then the conditions which were the main thing. They

Kar: had no rest period. They had a half hour lunch, I think. They couldn't go out. They had to bring something, and they would rather go out. And whatever the conditions were, that was the main thing that they wanted from the employer. So we sent it in to the employers.

And in the meantime, as you say, if it was Jenny I don't know, or somebody else began saying it belongs to them. So what I did say about her ^{and those} trying that were to take them away from me was to say this factory has been here a number of years, where were you? I just started several years ago, or less than two years ago. So as long as the people came to us we are going to organize them. That was my answer. She said, well it was her group. We're going to see about it. You butted in on something that belongs to us. So I said, if it belongs to you and eventually the people want to go there, OK. Otherwise they are with us.

So anyway we didn't even get a chance to have a first meeting with the employer. We get a letter from Dubinsky, Pollack and Emil Rieve. See, Dubinsky went to them [Rieve and Pollack] and told them to see what we could do about turning over to them. So Rieve said, well, since we have an agreement here with Dubinsky, and Textile and Amalgamated Clothing Workers organize only within our own ranks, I think it's up to you to turn them over to the ILGWU. Pollock writes the same thing - I am very happy that the people got organized, something to that effect. He said, however, I am sorry to say that possibly you have to turn them over - possibly you will have to turn them over. But you will get further word from us.

So I waited for that further word. And we had another meeting in the meantime. And I told the people, I said you know that the garment workers union is claiming you and eventually I don't know whether I will have to turn you over to them or not. So I explained to them

Kar: how unions are organized; that they are organized on the basis of jobs. Like textile is weaving and that tyoe~~k~~, and garment workers is where they make men's clothing and ILGWU is women's clothing, and that type. They were not happy. The people were very very - so you'll have to give us up. And I said "Well, in that case I will. But we'll see what happens."

In the meantime we sent the contract in to the employer, and I did ask for a meeting, and the employer set the date two weeks from then to meet. So we elected a dommittee. We elected stewards and everything. So I called them up and told them we were meeting in two weeks and we will see what we can do for getting them conditions.

In the meantime I get a letter from Dubkinsky and signed by Rieve that " Our officials [ILGWU] will go and negotiate, and I had to hand it over. And I think I can say that, and I will. Pollack came herelater. I was very angry about it. I told him that this was five hundred members for the textile. He says, "You should have kept them." He said, "We had to say that." Well, what could I do. They were already given over. And that is what happened, the whole story on Gantner and Mattern. I don't know whether I should say that.

Ken: Why not?

Kar: But that was the truth.

Ken: What happened in the negotiations then?

Kar: When I handed over the negotiations, naturally I was not active in that.

Ken: She must have had a hell of a time getting a contract.

Kar: She did because the people were angry. Now if I had negotiated, like in other times that I had negotiated, we can't get everything that they want. When employees are negotiating for a contract and want so much money and such conditions, you have to tell them. This is going to be tough to get. You can't . It's impossible

Kar: as yet. Let's organize first. They will take my word for it. But when Jenny told them, naturally they wouldn't take it. I knew that we couldn't get everything we asked for. I would have told them like I told the people in every group, don't expect everything, but you are going to have better conditions than you have now, and if you keep asking you will get those too.

/But you see, when they got Jenny, they thought because I didn't say anything at the time they could get all that, and they were mad at her.

Ken: I see. So in a way she partially ~~was~~ justified, you might say.

Kar: Partially yes. But it wasn't because I asked for the sky. It was the people themselves. And you can't tell them no. A lot of times you can't tell them no. You say, OK, we will see how far we can get on it. Sometimes they got mad at me too when I told them in some of our groups, now look, nobody in the area~~s~~ has that. You think you can get it, a smaller group and poorer group. I said, you have to have more reason sometimes, get little by little. They used to get mad - "Oh, you are working for the bosses." They told me that many a time. So I would go back and tell them, "All right. Take it up and see how far you can get." When they see they can't, they get behind me, and they did all these years.

Ken: How was your policy different than that of the ILGWU in negotiations. In other words you always got people in the plants to participate in negotiations. Did the ILG do that too?

Kar: No, they had a union committee negotiate as far as I know at that time. I don't know what happened later. But during that time they had a union committee to negotiate.

Ken: Your policy was ?

Kar: To involve the people themselves. They would see the arguments. They would know what to come back and say. They wouldn't say, she agreed, or something like that.

Kar: I had a committee from every department. Sometimes the employers would be mad because I insisted that they pay them so they wouldn't lose time, and they would be mad. "Why do you need ten?" And I would say "There are ten departments."

Ken: Oh yes. You were in the Central Labor Council of the AF of L at this time and she [Matyas] was in the Central Labor Council of the AF of L at this time -

Kar: When we organized Gantner and Mattern. I think we were already CIO. I am not sure.

Ken: What ever it was, the Industrial Labor Council or the Central Labor Council, what happened there?

Kar: I didn't bring the question up at all. You see I would have brought it up if I hadn't had the letter from Rieve and Pollack and Dubinsky. I would have brought it up if she had insisted. I would have said, "Well, who's right to organize. And the factory was here for years and years, and she didn't do it." I didn't have a chance to say that because I got these letters. And we just went ahead on these letters.

Ken: Did you ever know her before this happened?

Kar; No. When I started organizing, I forgot, bag workers? - they had a hall and we didn't. We used to get one from the I.W.W.U., and we couldn't always get a meeting place from the I.L.W.U. So I called up, it wasn't her, it was whoever was managing the office, and I asked for a meeting place. And they gave us the hall and didn't charge anything. That's what she meant.

Ken: Did you get to know her after that?

Kar: The first time I think I met her was when I was organizing another shop in San Jose or somewhere out that way. And I went out there and I signed those people up. It was just a small shop, less than twenty. I signed them up and she came out. It was a rainy day and she came out and said, "Oh, you are

Kar: the Communist trying to organize." I said, "These people want my union. And if I am a communist, socialist, democrat or republican, it doesn't make any difference. They want a union. And what are you doing here. This place has been here a long time." I told her, right to her face. She says, "But it belongs to us." I said, "If it belongs to you, why didn't you come after it." I had already collected dues and everything from ~~xxxxxxx~~ those people. And ^{she} says "Well, I'll show you -" or something. And she picked up her umbrella. It wasn't raining then. She had it folded. She started to hit me with the umbrella. So I grabbed it from her. And I said, "Now look, this has gone too far." I grabbed that umbrella and I wouldn't give it to her. So we had quite a struggle. And one of the women came, and she helped me. You know, one of the workers. She said, "Don't give in to her. Don't give in to her."

I signed them up and
So finally I went away. I had the cards and the money, and I went away, and it was the same story.

Ken: Was that the Spirella Corset?

Kar: I don't know. I don't rememger the name now.

Ken: I guess not. Spirella was a long, drawn out strike.

Kar: She did have a strike later in that plant, I remember, but I don't remember if it was the same or not. It was a small place. The people called me. Somebody told me. They called me and I went out there.

Ken: How did she find out about it then?

Kar: Maybe the same people called her, I don't know [laughter]. I have no idea how she found out. She was there the same time. I knew her by sight, but that was the first time I confronted her.

Ken: I wonder why she was so antagonistic toward you.

Kar: Because I was taking her members, she thought.

Ken: Did you have anything to do with her later on?

Kar: No. I never met her. I had nothing to do with her. I never met her at the Central Labor Council. She never attended the meetings.

Ken: I guess that takes care of that.

Kar: I can prove that story if necessary by Pollack. He is

Kar: on pension now in New Jersey. I get cards from him. And also by a couple of members I know that are living her.

Ken: They have the complete union records back East. That's very interesting. Let's get to Los Angeles now. You went to Los Angeles in 1937, 1938?

Kar: Something like that.

Ken: Why did you go to Los Angeles?

Kar: Well, I was assigned as West Coast organizer of Textile Workers, as representative of the Textile Union. And I was asked by the International if I could help in Los Angeles. So I went out there and tried to help organize various groups. The main thing at that time was the hoisery workers. It was a big group. We finally got them signed up.

And I went out there again when they were signing the contract.

Ken: The hoisery was a separate union wasn't it, but under textile?

Kar: It was under the textile - a branch of the textile.

Ken: So, what was your job as international rep?

Kar: To go to help organize wherever I was needed. I went to Los Angeles many times. I went to Los Angeles to organize bag workers. After we got our bag workers organized I went there. And we had quite a good success. Got most of the shops signed up. Of course, not alone. I had help from the local people.

That was the time I travelled to various places, even up to Pendleton [Oregon] to make a talk to the workers.

Ken: Was there any difference between organizing in San Francisco and organizing in Los Angeles?

Kar: Yes. They were much more scared of the union.

End of tape

OK SK.
10/13/77

Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Thursday, August 25, 1977, at home
of Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

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Ken: Let's see. Where were we now. You were talking about the difference between organizing in San Francisco and in Los Angeles.

Kar: In Los Angeles it was harder to organize because it was ~~not~~ ^{considered} a union town and the people were more afraid, and the employers had more of a free hand in scaring them than they do here in San Francisco. So organizing was a little slow. And the people had to be convinced that the union is necessary more than in San Francisco because in San Francisco the people understood what the union meant, while in Los Angeles you had to explain to them. That's why it was harder to organize them.

Ken: What contact did you have with other women organizers in Los Angeles? In the CIO?

Kar: What others?

Ken: I mean, did you know any other women organizers down there?

Kar: Oh, women - I did not know any. Those that helped me there were men. There were no women. In the textile there wasn't a woman that came forward that I know of.

Ken: I meant women from other unions.

Kar: From other unions - I went to their Central Labor Council and saw a few women there. But I never got acquainted with them. Those that helped me and those that worked at the time I was there were all men.

Ken: Because it was before the war, mainly? And what relationship did you have - how were the men?

Kar: They were working with me and there were no questions asked whether they should or not because I am a woman.

Kar: At times I had felt it. It was true when I went before the employers, for instance, in a couple of those places I had a feeling that because I went there along with a man, a local man, that he didn't address the questions to me. He kept addressing to the man although I answered. I answered most of everything. But whenever I gave an answer and he wanted to ask some more, he wouldn't look my way. He looked at the man there with me.

Ken: Just like in textile in Northampton.

Kar: That's right. I think they felt that a woman doesn't belong here. I had that feeling.

Ken: How was the problem of discrimination against aliens handled in Los Angeles?

Kar: I don't think it was bad. You see all through the type of textiles we were organizing, the same as in Massachusetts, I think the same would have held true in Passaic, New Jersey, in Lawrence, and the same in Los Angeles. Their workers were people of that type. I mean they were Chicanos, Spanish speaking, some Black people. And so the whole thing worked out right. There was no feeling toward them any different than an employer has towards that type of worker.

Ken: I see. When I was asking you about the difficulty of organizing in Los Angeles - was it more difficult to organize the women than the men, or vice versa?

Kar: No. I don't think so. The majority of those we did organize were women. And I didn't think they were any harder to organize than men. They were all, in general, harder to organize in Los Angeles than up here in the North.

Ken: Something else happened when you were down in Los Angeles in 1937 and 1938 - the Furniture Workers and the Textile Workers got together and were fighting against something called The Neutral Thousands. It was an employers group.

Kar: I know only vaguely about that. It wasn't during the

Kar: time I was making those trips. But it was some type of vigilantes that these employers got together to scare the people from organizing. And that was what it was. I heard about it when I was - when I was there later. I heard about it by word of mouth, but I didn't contact any of them. They told me that it was a type of organization that the employers put up to scare the workers from organizing. And I understand that it wasn't only Textile and Furniture, but it affected other workers throughout the City. It affected all the workers, and it was hard to organize for a time. And furthermore, another reason it was harder, we had the advantage in the North here because President Roosevelt had said that the workers should organize. And it started because of him. We had this general organization at that time of these unorganized workers. And in Los Angeles they didn't have a campaign to organize. It came on later when this was almost forgotten. And the employers had a free hand to scare the workers.

Here we even had a talking point when we organized. "President Roosevelt wants you organized." And so the people were not scared at all. It was something that was legal and necessary. I had that feeling.

Ken: You were involved in the Guild [Newspaper Guild] strike there, weren't you?

Kar: You mean in Los Angeles?

Ken: Yes.

Kar: Just to the extent because I was an officer of the CIO Council in San Francisco. We all went down there to help as Council members.

Ken: How did you help?

Kar: By leafleting, picketing, and appealing to the employer to sit down and talk to the workers. We helped in that manner. The whole group went down. And we had banners and carried those, saying who ^{we} were, and so on, and the leaflets.

Ken: When the Textile Workers switched to the CIO, What part did you play in that?

Kar: What do you mean?

Ken: I mean, when - the Textile Workers was one of the International groups that switched from the AF of L to the CIO, wasn't it. Or were there two textile unions.

Kar: No. There was one textile union by that time. We were still in the AF of L until the AF of L threw us all out which was 1937, I think. All the unions were thrown out that were working to organize the unorganized, the textile, the clothing, even the furniture workers, and many others unions. We were all thrown out.

Ken: Let me put it this way. What part did you plan in organizing the CIO Council?

Kar: The CIO Council formed itself almost from a delegation of those unions. When we were thrown out of the AF of L naturally we had to have a central labor body. And each group organized who they wanted to send to the Central Labor Council [called the Industrial Union Council - one was State and the others were cities] as delegates. So we had from textile, from each local, other unions had from their locals. And as we met we organized our committees, like president, vice-president, secretary, and so on from the group itself.

Ken: And were you a delegate to the San Francisco -

Kar: I was a delegate to the San Francisco Council, and later on I was elected vice president of the council.

Ken: There was also a State Industrial Union Council. Did you belong to both?

Kar: Yes. I belonged to both because we paid dues to both the State and the local council. So we sent delegates there, and to conventions that we had once a year, The convention elected the officials.

Ken: I see. Now let's get down to ILWU Local 6. They were in the CIO, you were in the CIO, and you were organizing bag companies at that time, weren't you? What part did you play in the organization of the bag companies?

Kar: What part? I organized them. I organized them. At first there was a little rift between us and Local 6

Kar: because they felt that they should organize, or they started with one of the factories. But I appealed that time to the committee, the ILWU committee, and Harry Bridges, and I told them this really does not belong to the ILWU organization. It should come to the textile, and then they agreed. It wasn't anything bad or it wasn't anything that brought any repercussions of any kind.

Ken: But I know that in Los Angeles the bag workers were organized by Local 26, weren't they?

Kar: In Los Angeles they had a longer squabble over it, and finally they were turned over to textile. And later on textile petered out, so they took them over anyway, same as here.

Ken: I see. Here's a question. The Textile Workers union leaders were used to working with women because the women were in the locals there, but the ILWU was mostly men. What differences did you perceive between the attitudes of the leaders of the Textile Workers and the leaders in the Warehouse Union toward you, or toward women?

Kar: I don't think the ILWU had any feeling because we were women. I didn't see that. In their own organization they didn't have many women. Naturally they were mostly men in their organization, in their committees and so on. Well, in the textile we had a majority of women, and they dealt with us whenever it was necessary. In fact when we organized these various - like Labor Day - they took for granted that we women would march and would hold our banners or whatever was necessary. And we marched along with them and there were no repercussions or no feeling of any kind because we were women - against us I mean.

In fact during these big parades our textile union was even put forward because we were women by the ILWU. We were to march in the first contingent of that group that marched.

Ken: Did you participate in negotiations with the ILWU men?

Kar: No, because I had no occasion to do that.

Ken: Well, how about the reaction of the rank and file of the locals?

Kar: Well their rank and file and our rank and file hardly ever met so I couldn't give you anything about how they felt. We hardly met, because the only time we met was at these mass meetings that we had - like ILWU had a lot of different mass meetings. There were so many strikes that they had. And then the parades we had when we organized and met at the different parts of the city where we should start marching.

Ken: Oh, I was going to ask you [when you negotiated for the bag companies and got raises and vacations and rotation of work in slack periods was there any discussion of pregnancy leave, that is how long.

Kar: Well, that came up with the very first contract. Many of these women were younger women and either were pregnant or expecting to be pregnant. Naturally they wanted to know if they could come back and get their seniority. Because everything we negotiated, it was negotiated by having seniority rights. In case of lay offs or in case of the factory closing down and re opening and calling people back, in that case they were to be called by seniority, not factorywise, but seniority by departments because they knew these jobs. So we negotiated that right from the beginning. And we assured these women that as far as seniority they were all right. But pregnancy was considered a woman quitting. So we had to have a special clause for that.

Ken: I wondered how long pregnancy leave was given.

Kar: Six months - three before, and three after, from what I remember.

Ken: When you were an official in your local, did women ever come to you with any particular problems they had?

Kar: Yes. They came with all kinds of problems. Even their personal problems. They would get in a fight with their husband and come and ask me if I could help them do something about it. One of them wanted to go and complain

Kar: to the city because the husband was beating them up, or something, and could I help them. They would come with all that type of problems. Some of them I took up. Some of them I had to say it isn't a union problem, but here, you go there or you go to somebody else who might be able to solve it.

Many of them I took up personally myself. I would call up a husband, for instance, and ask him if that was true. And if it was, I asked him to lay off. This is the U.S.A., and you are not supposed to do that. And many a time these women came and thanked me [laughter]. I took it upon myself. It wasn't the duty of our union. I can feel it should have been. But you couldn't help it when they came crying. And it was my policy anyway, from childhood, to do something. So I used to do quite a bit of that.

And even the fights between the men in the shop. They used to fight. Maybe somebody stepped up on the job, got a better job or something. They would have a fist fight. Then the boss would call up and say "Now look. Your members are fighting. Now come and settle it." And I had to go and settle. And most of the time it was resolved to their satisfaction.

Ken: What other problems did women have besides their husbands beating them up?

Kar: Sometimes some of them had other problems like they took something for the family from the store and they couldn't pay it off. And could we as a union help them by telling them that they were working. As far as that was concerned I would give them a letter that they are employed and making so much. I couldn't guarantee anything, naturally, as a union; but I did help them out that way by writing to the store saying that that particular family, the mother is working, and she is making that much money, and that she told me she will try to pay it off.

As much as I could I tried to help them because that type of workers that I had to deal with were workers that were the lowest paid and the least

Kar: educated, not knowing what to do or how to cope with a lot of things.

Ken: What did the union do to try to educate them?

Kar: We did try. That's true. After that we were called reds. You know there was a California Labor School. I think you know about it, and this California Labor School was at that time in existence. I told many of these workers that it would be well that if they had time to spend a little bit of that time at the California Labor School. There were so many subjects that they can take up there. They could take up union work, how to run a union if they were interested. There was also a class on learning how to speak better English. And there were various classes. I had quite a few of them join that California Labor School until the McCarthy period when they closed it.

Ken: What were the conditions in the plants for women, or the men too, at that time?

Kar: Conditions were poor all over. They didn't have enough lunch period. They didn't have rest periods which we got afterwards. You see, four hours straight work is pretty hard if you are running a machine or anything. Well, we had a fifteen minute break in between. And that was one of the main things we have always negotiated. And they had none of that. And various other conditions the employer had. If you were running a machine and even if your hour was up to go home you still had to stay until you finish. So we cut that off. They could stop and the piece could lay there until the next morning.

And some of the other - they seemed to be inconsequential when you think of them - but to these people they were very important improvements that they got during that period.

Ken: You were involved in other things besides union work. I remember reading about your saying that they shouldn't buy silk stockings; they should refuse to

Ken: buy "bullets for China." What was the response from your local?

Kar: After every union meeting we had a little discussion period, and a little educational all the time in all the locals. So we used to bring these things up. That's where we brought up that you should avoid helping in every way a war, but stay on the side of those who are wishing the war would be over. And the people would ask, well how. Well, that was the time you brought out silk stockings and all the other things that would have helped to fight back against the war. And we explained what it meant ~~to be~~^{to be} in a war; American hadn't had a war in a long period here. And it means that your homes are broken up. And the children don't have school. They have to go underground to be taught. And all that. Every meeting we had something on that after the meeting for a few minutes.

Ken: It wasn't good and welfare, you just continued?

Kar: I would say maybe a half hour. Because we had our shop meetings in different factories after work. They didn't want to stay too long because they had to go home and prepare their meals and get ready for the next morning. So we had short meetings, very short. Just something that came up in the shop, straight to the point, finished that, then we had this short good and welfare like for the people. Not in the big union meeting, but in the shop meetings. And then we would overhear something that happened in the shop. For instance if they had some kind of a squabble in the shop over something, or even a fight among themselves. That's where it would come up in that particular shop meeting. And we would straighten it out there. And then if there wasn't anything of that, then we would bring up something on good and welfare. It was sort of a little education.

Ken: How did the women in the union feel about wearing cotton stockings?

Kar: Some did buy them. Some didn't buy them. We didn't go around looking and saying "Why aren't you wearing?"

Kar: We didn't go that far. We just asked them and told them why.

Ken: What about the scrap iron to Japan?

Kar: As far as Japan, during the war we asked them not to buy any Japanese goods.

Ken: I mean before the war. You know they were picketing on the waterfront against sending scrap iron to Japan.

Kar: Yes. We just brought that out because we had nothing to do with that; but we told them, we explained why - that we should support ILWU in that case, the waterfront unions. At the same time we asked them not to buy anything from Japan if they possibly can.

Ken: There was a time when a plant closed down the terry cloth division because they said the rotation of work wasn't any good because less efficient workers were on the job?

Kar: That was right here in the cotton mill. They had abandoned a lot of work because it wasn't selling here. And the cotton staple that they got here was a different type of staple making fine goods they went into making automobile tires, fabric covers; then they went into making carpets. This is one of them [showing me the carpet on the floor] that I have had all these years that I bought from them. And it is not wool or anything. But it is so strong. I got it nineteen years ago. It is terrible looking now, but that's it. And they went into making these various things from these fine goods that they had originally.

Ken: This one was just an incident, I guess, but evidently there was a big beef about it because the company claimed that you had a rotation system and that everybody worked on the job in rotation. And they didn't want to accept that because they said that some of the people didn't work as well as others.

Kar: You see, we had harder work. They had so many looms and some of the looms were very hard to work while others were easier. And they were paying the same

Kar: because the company, because we couldn't ask the company to pay more on this and less on that for the reason that they changed quite often. We couldn't follow that up even. So they paid evenly, and I remember that they came and said some of the people didn't want to take the hard work all the time and others have easier work. We changed around. And when they changed around those that were used to easier work naturally didn't do as well on the harder work, and the bosses were mad about it. But we finally had it that way. We had a rotation.

Ken: It was the only fair way, really.

Kar: That's right. They all learned eventually, and they all knew how to do each one.

Ken: Well, during this 1937 and 1938 period there were always strikes going on, cannery, mine mill and smelter workers, agricultural workers. What part did your union play in these strikes?

Kar: Outside of textile. We helped out. For instance ILWU had a lot of strikes. One time there (I couldn't exactly tell you what period it was) I remember what we did is we passed an assessment for the workers of fifty cents a month to help the strike. Then we got heck from our international for that. The international wrote (they didn't like the ILWU for some reason) - so they wrote that we had no business to do that. But we voted for it, so I wrote back and told them the workers voted for it and they have a right to support a local strike. So we supported it for I would say six months or so. And that was big money. That fifty cents was big money for textile.

Ken: Now, when tee ILG quit the CIO, what change did this make in your relationship with the ILG in this area?

Kar: At the council meetings was the only plade we met them, since we had delegates from each local. Since I was a vice president several times back and forth I remember that one of these ILGWU delegates used to ask for the floor or something. And there was no difference. We

Kar: gave him the floor. He spoke. And at the meeting we would speak to each other. So we held no grudge as members against each other.

Ken: When they left and went back to the AF of L then, it didn't make that much difference?

Kar: No difference. All the places were organized and there was no more stepping on each other's toes.

Ken: Let see now. When Henry Schmidt withdrew as vice president of the State Industrial Union Council, you were installed. How were you chosen?

Kar: From the delegates there.

Ken: You were a delegate already?

Kar: I was a delegates, from my groups. And all the officials are chosen from the delegates at the meeting.

Ken: You were the only woman on the board there. How did you feel?

Kar: I don't know. I was so used to that that I didn't feel any difference. By that time it seemed that wherever I went I was the only woman negotiating, I was the only woman here and there. So I got used to it. I didn't even think about it.

Ken: Did the men get used to it?

Kar: Of course they did. In fact at times I was over patronized, or whatever you call it. At times, because I was the only woman. But I made them feel that there was no difference.

Ken: I remember. You always used to go to meetings, or go to some place and speak, and they would say, "what will you have, little lady?"

End of side A

Start of side B [counter #1

Ken: Let's see - on the Meehan Bill. That was to limit jute bag production in San Quentin. Did you present this Meehan bill to the Legislature?

Kar: I can't think now who was our representative at that time. We asked the representative, and then we got a committee to go up with him when the bill was presented.

Kar: And I had a chance to say a few words, too, on that. It was passed eventually.

Ken: Tell me a little bit more about it.

Kar: It was. The employers were very angry at our asking for more money at the time it came up. And they always brought out San Quentin is making so much. It is taking away such and such a percentage of the work that would come to the factory. And instead of that, convict labor is making it at the cheap wages. That is why they can't compete, can't sell their manufactured goods.

So we finally decided at one of the meetings - the only thing we can do is to try with the legislature and see if they will give something else to these convicts to do instead of doing something that general labor is doing here in the State. So that was passed. Then I asked the City Council in San Francisco to support us, which they did.

Then we appealed to this legislator, the congressman who we wanted to bring it in.

Ken: His name must have been Meehan.

Kar: I don't remember what the name was. I have it somewhere, but I can't think of it at the moment. So we worked it up ourselves, and then we asked him if he thinks it is all right. So he put it in the language that has to be done to bring it up before the Legislature. He helped us, and he told us when it was going to come up.

So we went up there, a committee of us - three women. And we went up there, and I had a chance to say a few words, and then he presented it.

Ken: You mean on the floor of the Legislature?

Kar: Right. And then it took some time. It took at least another six months before we heard about it. Then we heard that they had a committee investigating San Quentin. And then they finally presented it to San Quentin. Not as law, but they presented that San Quentin should go into something else instead of doing that. So they did. What they did I don't

Kar: remember. So they abandoned making bags.

Ken: I thought i was just a limit; that they decided to limit production.

Kar: Oh, no. First they were going to, and then they completely abandoned it. And that helped us quite a bit.

Ken: Is that the only time you and the employer jointly participated in anything?

Kar: I think so. As far as I remember here locally, yes. It was the only time that we really agreed one hundred percent [laughter]. It is strange that he agreed because afterwards we learned that he really lost a lot of business. He could have had other types of bags that they weren't making [in San Quentin]. They were making mainly jute. Here they made other fibres too. But he said jute bags took away a lot of work that would have went to the people here.

Ken: Did it actually give more work to your members?

Kar: What?

Ken: When it stopped in San Quentin, did your members get more work?

Kar: Well, we didn't feel it that way, but we thought so. I mean we always had enough, for the size of the factories we had enough work. But the employer, I think, must have felt better. I don't know whether we did or not.

Ken: When the National Labor Relations Board was used in the hair and felt industry in Los Angeles, were you involved in that?

Kar: No. Later on, I want to say, Los Angeles had their own representative there from the textile and they had- It was only in the beginning that I was involved with the hoisery and the bags. Then after that they had an organizer of their own who came from the International. So they were on their own.

Ken: I see. You were still a representative though?

Kar: I represented them. If they needed something that would involve the International I would be called in. But they got along.

Ken: This brings up a question - Was the N.L.R.B. really useful to you then?

Kar: It was in the beginning until it was changed by the Taft Hartley law; not changed, but I mean until the Taft Hartley law came in an nullified National Labor Relations Board. It was quite useful. Yes. We had several meetings of the employers on it and we had an arbitration on several cases where we had to bring that in because we didn't agree with the employers. So we called an arbitration and got the arbitrator to work with us. I think that it helped us because he couldn't go otherwise. He went on our side, the arbitrator. That was in bags and in the curtain industry.

Ken: I noticed that you had a lot of articles in the Labor Herald and you always called on people to purchase union made goods. Was this a tactic that came over from the AF of L?

Kar: Well, no. The CIO was for that. The CIO, when it was formed, also had a committee on the union label and this committee sent us all kinds of literature and instructions how to go about getting the union label in different articles that we produced.

But we as textile produced such articles as bags. You are not going to put a union label on them. The only ones we could have done was in the curtains. Those were organized last and we hadn't even had a chance to get to them too much. And everything else like ropes, the cordage factory that we organized, and the cotton mill, had such a variety of things that it didn't have one big thing going. It had a lot of small things. They made rugs. At times they made bedspreads. They made quilts. Then they started making pillows. Things of that sort. There was a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

We had no chance to go after a union label. But we did support it generally in the Council. We talked about it and supported all other unions that could

Kar: put it in very easily.

Ken: So that's why you wrote in the paper, buy these things?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: I was going to ask you what tactics you used in the AF of L you dropped when organizing for the CIO. It is sort of a silly question because you used your own methods. You didn't use AF of L methods and CIO methods.

Kar: I didn't know what was the AF of L method. I never learned. I think I did tell you how I organized curtains.

Ken: Yes - which I thought was just great.

Kar: It is just a thought. Well, we will try all kinds of tactics and see what will bring them in. And we did.

Ken: It was a question I wrote when I wasn't really thinking. All right. Let's get to the Little Dies Committee. You were fingered by Frye from the AF of L, who testified. And also the Little Dies Committee here [in San Francisco] was investigating the Workers Alliance. I didn't know you belonged to that.

Kar: I didn't belong to it. I was called before them but I think I was called because of union activity. Or maybe they thought I belonged to it.

Ken: Tell me exactly what happened then.

Kar: Nothing much happened. They just took fingerprints.

Ken: They took your fingerprints?

Kar: Yes. They took everybody's.

Ken: You didn't refuse to go before the committee?

Kar: No. I didn't refuse to go. You couldn't very well. And at the Council we took it up, and we were told to go. It was from the Council [Industrial Union Council] that we were called in. There were about five of us. We went at the same time. They took our fingerprints. What could you do. You can't refuse. So we gave them our fingerprints.

And they asked a few questions and those could answer like our name, where we lived and so on, we did. Others we did not answer.

Ken: What kind of questions did they ask?

Kar: They asked if you were a communist party member. They

Kar: asked would you be for America in case of war. I can't remember all the questions of that type. They asked a lot of questions. They were silly questions. They asked us why we don't answer if we are for America. Because they are stupid questions. I think one of us answered that way - that it was a stupid question. That's why we don't answer. And we didn't answer.

Of course they had no power to really arrest you because they were (I don't know how you call it).

Ken: An investigative committee?

Kar: Just investigating, and they had no power. We knew that. So we didn't have to answer. Whatever we did we did voluntarily. We came there because they asked us. They gave us, you know, subpoenas for that. We had to go. But it didn't affect me any except one of our International (that was in the beginning) representatives of the Textile Union, a man by the name of Baldanzi, I don't know if you have heard of him, Baldanzi. And this Baldanzi was once in the communist party when it was organized. But he left as a stool pigeon.

He was the one, after he heard that I was called before that committee, he wrote a letter to me saying that I'm treading on very dangerous ground; that I should stop it if I am one of them, and just confess before the committee. Something to that effect. I am not quoting it correctly. So I never answered it. So I think he probably told Rieve and Pollack and all the rest that he had contacted me.

Ken: Did Rieve or Pollack ever say anything?

Kar: No.

Ken: What about your own local?

Kar: They never paid any attention. They knew, but they didn't pay attention. They didn't ask me any questions. It didn't affect me in any way in the local.

Ken: Let's see. You went to the Textile Workers Organizing Committee and the Textile Workers Union convention about then, didn't you? Wasn't there a convention around that time?

Kar: The first convention that was called was when we were organizing. Yes. I went to that. It was in nineteen thirty six, thirty five, something like that. I don't remember exactly.

Ken: How did you participate in that convention?

Kar: At that convention we had quite a bit of representation of women because most of the textile were women of course. And it was a very good convention, the first convention. Naturally it was enthusiastic with speakers like Rieve and Pollack. There were other textile leaders who would talk on how textile should be organized. We would be one of the biggest unions in America because there are so many in textile. That we could stop maybe by tariff or some other way getting cheap goods from abroad, and we would get better wages here, and so on. It was a good, very enthusiastic convention.

I didn't go alone. I think there were two others from two locals as delegates. And they were very enthused that we came here with a lot of enthusiasm in going ahead an organizing the rest of textile.

Ken: Did women at the convention, since they were mostly women, bring up any particular things that affect women?

Kar: No. They did not speak. I don't remember of any woman getting up and speaking.

Ken: I'll be darned. Including yourself?

Kar: I was on the committee so I spoke for the committee, either the constitution committee or something. So I was reading off the committee's report. But that was all.

Ken: Did the convention pay any particular attention to women's problems?

Kar: No. There was no discussion on women's problems.

Ken: I mean child care, etc., the common ordinary things that are needed?

Kâr: No. That never came up at that first convention.

Later on some of the locals brought out what they are asking and why they are striking, when they had strikes, and so on. But in that first convention, no. It was mainly on organizing and the need of organization, and what big factories are not organized and why they should be. And that they are going to be hard to organize. And J.P. Stevens came up I remember. That has been coming up every one, though by right it is not even textile. But it was brought up that factories like that should be organized. I think ~~xxx~~ one of those pamphlets that you were looking at tells what was spoken of at one of the meetings on J.P. Stevens.

Ken: Well I guess that's logical. The first national meeting would be on organizing. It was during that period. And after you get them organized, then you worry about the other problems.

Now there was a national CIO Convention in San Francisco in 1939 and Rieve was here and he reported on organization in the deep South. Did you see him when he was here?

Kar: Oh, yes. Of course. He came and met with us. Every time they came for anything at all they always met with our group and told us how our union is growing; where the organization started, and what we can do to help from here, if we can.

Ken: How did national negotiations affect you on the West Coast?

Kar: It helped. Every time something was negotiated and we were negotiating we would say look, they got seven cents, or they got five cents, or they got this and they got that, and we want the same thing plus.

Ken: Did they get more in the South?

Kar: They got less, and then the employer would shoot back at us. They would say, why don't you tell us what they got. What are you asking? So we had to again tell them, we are living here in San Francisco. We can't buy the same things at the same amount of

Kar: money that they can buy over there. We had quite a time over that, but we told them, however, that they had meetings and that they did get something in their contract, so we are asking now again here. And the reason we are asking more is the area. And the employers would try to scare us - we don't belong in this area. We should move out. So we told them that that's your privilege. But since you are here, since you've got your buildings here and have all your machinery here you are evidently going to stay and sell your goods probably in the North. So as long as you do we want more pay, and we are entitled to it and we should get it. That was our answer. They always cried about the South.

Ken: What about the Yanks are not coming campaign?

Kar: What?

Ken: The yanks are not coming, that campaign. I am just sort of going along on what happened year after year now.

Kar: I don't remember too much about that. I don't think it affected us in any way.

Ken: You know, mainly the left wing was against the war.

Kar: Against the war, we were, but that slogan I don't remember. I don't think the slogan hit us that much.

Ken: Let's see. You made a report now to the State Industrial Union Council. Here it is. I sent that to you, I think. You want to look it over again now?

Kar: I don't think you sent it.

Ken: [reading - not into the tape] Am now including what Mrs. Kaross read, as follows:

From 1939 Executive Board Minutes of the California State Industrial Union Council meeting held at the Cabrillo Hotel in Los Angeles on November 11 and 12, 1939:

Vice President Baltrun reported on the Textile Workers Union and the San Francisco Industrial Union Council. The San Francisco Council has made good progress. The radio program, in particular, has been effective. This has been a part of the Council's Activities for more than a year and a half, and in spite of some financial difficulties they have been able to keep it going.

(Note: Instead of continuing a copy, will include xerox copy of the minutes attached to this page)

Ken: What was the confused jurisdictional status of the waste material workers mentioned in this report?

Kar: Some of it was organized by ILWU, the waste material, and we felt that it should belong to the textile. And we spoke to them. At the time here [in San Francisco] we had very little. It was mostly in Los Angeles, the waste material. Since the ILWU had them, they were organizing the balance of it and it seemed they were going to get that into their union too. They said in that case if the textile union in Los Angeles continues to grow and be a real union (at that time it was just beginning) he said we will talk about jurisdiction at that time, and we might switch over. But as far as I know the waste were never transferred to the textile.

Ken: I noticed that it didn't come up under new business.

Kar: No, it didn't come up because he [Louis Goldblatt] made that statement. It is not in here.

Ken: He must have made it off the record.

Kar: Probably off the record; that they will see ~~xxx~~ how far we get in the textile, because they already had them. Just like it should have been with Gantner and Mattern, what happened to me at that time, the demand that they switch over. Well, we didn't demand that they switch over. We said, think it over. It does belong to textile because it is not a warehouse. At that time it was mostly warehouse that they were organizing. That it should be switched. That was the statement he made, we will see later on. If the textile is organized there will be no trouble. There was no trouble. I think we left it there and that was it.

Ken: I remember when Helene Powell went down to Los Angeles to organize for the ILWU she was organizing bag plants down there.

Kar: Even now, we have no textile left in Los Angeles.

Executive Board Minutes
California State Indus-
trial Union Council, CIO.
Held at Los Angeles, Cal.

Nov. 11 and 12th, 1939 of invitation to Executive Board Members
to attend the Guild picket line at Huntington Park on the evening of
Saturday, Nov. 11.

M/S/C: To adjourn at 12:30 P.M.

AFTERNOON SESSION, NOV. 11TH

Meeting called to order at 2:00 P.M., President Connelly presiding.

REPORTS OF BOARD MEMBERS:

Vice President Baltrun reported on the Textile Workers Union and the San Francisco Industrial Union Council. The San Francisco Council has made good progress. The radio program, in particular, has been effective. This has been a part of the Council's activities for more than a year and a half, and in spite of some financial difficulties they have been able to keep it going.

An organizational campaign was begun about three months ago with the Council paying an organizer to work full time in the field. The Western Union strike has commanded much of the attention of the Council.

The Textile Union is strong in San Francisco, where it is practically 100% organized. The three locals in the Bay Area formed a joint council. Many improvements have been made in working conditions, such as vacations with pay, increased wages, rest periods in the morning and afternoon, etc. There is one local in Eureka which has over a hundred members. The principal organizational field of the Textile Workers is Los Angeles, which holds prospects of a potential membership of 8000. Until recently there has been no clear-cut program laid down in Los Angeles. What help there was came largely from San Francisco and the national office. The Textile Workers went through some difficulties with their organizers, their most recent set-back resulting from warehousemen taking over jurisdiction of the Waste Material Workers.

Vice-President Baltrun pointed out the confused jurisdictional status of the Waste Material Workers, with claims presented by Textile Workers, warehousemen, and Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers. There are now two organizers in the Textile Union in Los Angeles, and since they have started good progress has been made, particularly in hosiery. The Union expects a contract shortly with the Mission Hosiery Mills, where the drive has been given added incentive by a very effective boycott. (Note; Since the Executive Board meeting the Textile Workers Union concluded an excellent union agreement with the Mission Hosiery Mills.

Vice-President Baltrun recommended that a committee of three be set up to investigate jurisdictional problems and disputes and make recommendations to the national organization.

Secretary Goldblatt reported on organizational activity in San Francisco. Progress noted in almost every field. There are certain

problems peculiar to San Francisco in organization inasmuch as most workers are already organized with the exception of white collar groups and domestic employees. Progress is being made in the organization of furniture workers. Specific difficulties are arising as a result of AFL attempting to negotiate collusive agreements with the shipyards, even going so far as to attempt to take over steel workers being organized by the SWOC.

Regarding the Warehouse Textile Workers' dispute, he spoke on some of the background of these problems and circumstances which led to the presence of the warehouse union in the textile mills. This was an organizational necessity at the time and it has been extremely difficult to make any switch inasmuch as the workers involved have accumulated certain benefits they are reluctant to surrender.

As to the recommendation of Vice-President Baltrun for the establishment of a committee on jurisdictional disputes, Secretary Goldblatt pointed out that the Council does not have power to determine jurisdiction. In cases where both unions agree to submit the matter to the State Council that body can then be of assistance in working out an understanding. However, where either party is reluctant to bring the matter before the Council there is nothing which this body can do. He expressed the opinion that many of the difficulties of the Textile Workers in Los Angeles spring from the failure to place organizational emphasis in a clear-cut textile field such as hosiery mills, etc. He stressed the splendid record of the Textile Workers Union and the affiliation and cooperation with the Councils.

M/S/C: That Sister Baltrun's recommendation on the establishment of a committee on jurisdictional disputes be put over to New Business.

Vice-President Schlipf, Alameda Industrial Union Council

The Alameda Industrial Union Council went through a period of financial difficulties and strenuous efforts to maintain their organization, and are now beginning to overcome these problems. The membership is increasing steadily and all locals can report good consolidation of their organizations. The machinists, auto and warehousemen report consistent gains. He presented the problem of Local Industrial Unions and advanced the suggestion that in many cases it was possible to disband Local Industrial Unions and place their membership with larger organizations more capable of servicing the membership.

The craft problem still exists as in the case of machinists, yet this organization must be maintained if the workers under its jurisdiction are to be given adequate protection. Some solution was being reached by the process of consolidation and amalgamation of smaller locals.

The CIO movement in Alameda County is healthy, and the attendance at sessions good. An obstacle that has to be overcome is the tendency of some of the locals, such as the Guild, warehousemen, etc. to look to the San Francisco locals for all leadership and guidance. This results in neglect of local affairs.

Council is cooperating closely with LNPL and showing good results.

Most pressing problem is the strike of rubber workers at American

Kar: It is either in warehouse or in some other unions. The same as here. Other unions took over after I left.

Ken: The warehousemen turned over the bag workers to you, didn't they?

Karl: They had one plant, and they turned over. We had the rest of them so there was no problem.

Ken: Rememger Betty De Losada? She was working in Ames Harris Neville [in San Francisco] and I asked her about it, and she remembered working at Ames Harris Neville when she was a very young girl, and that it was organized by you. But that the warehousemen came out with bullhorns and stuff and were putting out leaflets saying join the warehouse union. Do you remember that at all?

Kar: That was at the beginning of organizing when the warehouse claimed at that time they didn't know we were organizing. So that was the end of it. In a way they helped because the people did want to get organized. And then when I got into the picture we got it organized. There was no question about it.

Ken: Oh, it wasn't a matter of you against them. They didn't know you were doing it?

Kar: No, they didn't. I think that was the third shop that I organized. I organized Bemis, American Bag, and then I went to Ames Harris to organize. And they had already been there. But we had no trouble. They didn't organize. They were only campaigning for organization. They didn't have application cards signed or anything. So we didn't take away from them. But then they realized that as long as we were organizing, and they pulled out.

Ken: Then what was your relationship with the ILWU after that?

Kar: It was good. They helped. In fact they gave us assistance in getting us a hall to meet. And they helped us quite a bit.

Ken: I noticed in there that Lou said something about they could do more for the textile workers in one

Ken: area than you could.

Kar; That was mainly speaking in Los Angeles because in Los Angeles it was all true. We had nobody there that could get hold of it and they sent in from the international a fellow that couldn't get his foot in there somehow. Then he went back, and there was nobody left. And I couldn't stay there. So during that whole period when we didn't know what was going to happen in Los Angeles, that was what he was talking about, and that was all true.

Ken: I was just wondering whether he was speaking for the ILWU or as the head of the Industrial Union Council.

Kar: He was speaking for both, I guess.

Ken: Whether his heart was one place and his mind another, I didn't know.

Kar: He was correct. Later on we had some trouble about certain shops that we asked them to hand over to textile, which they did. But at first they didn't want to. But they were small shops that meant so little to them, and meant so much to the textile.

So they handed them over.

Ken: How did the workers feel about being handed over from one to the other?

Kar: They would tell the workers they were going to support in case of necessity. Otherwise they take up the questions that you are familiar with, and the ILWU is not. There was no problem about it.

Ken: That's nice to know. It's always nice when unions are happy together.

Ken: Why did you retire from the State Industrial Union Council?

Kar: At that time it was hard for me to travel so much. I had so much work here. And then I was getting into the peace movement. And I felt that somebody that could devote more time, not only by going to meetings, but to do other work that it was necessary to do being an officer. So I thought it would be better if I gave it to somebody else.

Ken: When you were presented with flowers [referring to a photo in the Labor Herald of Sonia Baltrun receiving a large bouquet from the president of the Council] how did you feel?

Kar; Well, naturally you feel good. You feel that you were appreciated. And I felt I was.

Ken: Exactly what did you do as a member of the State Industrial Union Council?

Kar: That was the San Francisco Industrial Union Council where I was presented with flowers.

Ken: Oh, I thought it was the state. Anyway, what was your job there that was too much?

Kar: If the president was absent I had to take care of running the meeting. I had to run the Council meeting, and answer some of the questions that were put up, some letters that came. And things of that sort. If there was some important meeting to go to, or if another union would call, or some official meeting with the city, well I had to go along - things of that sort that officials do. I had too much work.

Ken: And your union came first, the priority -

Kar: Naturally, and I had negotiations during that period too. I thought well, gee for the next six months I am going to be tied^{up} with a lot of negotiations for these different shops. You see if there was only one shop, but I had so many shops. I had the curtain shops. Then I had others like cordage and there were five bag factories. All those little shops, and each one required a meeting. And the the whole meeting of the local.

Ken: You had three locals, too.

Kar: Yes, and negotiations between all these various industries. It made an awful lot of work for one person and I was only one person. We had committees, but I was the one person at the head. I was District Manager. The time comes when you can't handle everything and I had to think what I should do.

Ken: I guess that's the end of this tape too. Good lord-how time goes.

End of tape

OK
11/3/77
SJK.
Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview with: Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Thursday, September 1, 1977, at home of
Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin, Tape #9 - page 185 - counter #1

Ken: There are a couple of questions I want to ask from the last interview. How do you think that because some of the men at the beginning of the CIO were more politically oriented than the average person because they had contact with communists, or were communists- did that effect their acceptance of you as a working person and as a full time official?

Kar: I do not think so?

Ken: Was it any different than when you were accepted by people who weren't politically motivated?

Kar: No. I didn't see any difference at all. I was accepted without question.

Ken: Well, when you worked with women, was there any difference when you worked with women who came into the labor movement through, say the YWCA, or from college and went to work in the labor movement and women who came up through the ranks in the factories?

Kar: There was some difference. Those that came from the factory asked more questions, wanted to learn more, they said, and they were always willing to come and help in every way that they could so that they could learn more. That's what they told me.

The other women, did what they were supposed to do, and left meetings, if they were at a meeting, or if they were in some committee meeting, took up what they had to. Somehow they did not know how to work with the women. It was hard to explain

Kar: to them that these other women have got to be taught very easily, ^{questions asked,} and questions answered. And that they do not know everything, and they have to have patience with them. Somehow I had a feeling right along they had no patience with these women. They thought, well they probably won't be able to learn anyway. Some of them. Some of them were very nice. But the majority of them were - they did their job and they left.

Ken: I wondered about that. Read somewhere that they had hired a lot of college women, and I wondered how they related to the working women.

Ken: Now, on the Meehan Bill - why did the employers leave it to the unions to go to the Legislature instead of doing it themselves. Didn't they have more pull politically?

Kar: They probably did, but they didn't care about it. Some of the questions we raised and some of the legislation, they didn't care about it one way or the other. They left it to the union - you want to do it, go ahead and do it.

Ken: I thought you did it because they were complaining that they were losing the work.

Kar: They were complaining, but they never wanted to do anything. They just let the thing slide until the union picked it up. That was right along - everything I have heard about them and everywhere I have had contact with them, it was all the same with the employers.

Ken: Here's one more thing. At the first Textile convention, you explained that everything was for organizing and starting a union. But at the following conventions, and throughout the years, how did you work in getting special legislation for women like you did in Massachusetts? How did you use the labor bodies like conventions and central labor councils?

Kar:

Kar: Well conventions had discussions and there were committees set up for that purpose. And I happened to be attached to some of these committees - we had the discussion and left it up to them. And it wasn't a local question, so we did not have anything to do with it. If it came to our local well we would support it.

Ken: Was there need for special legislation in California for women?

Kar: At that time, no. There might have been a lot of need, but we never discussed the question and it wasn't that important - it didn't affect us too much. As far as the hours of work, the overtime work which is not allowed for women after certain hours of work - that question was taken up generally by labor, not one particular group. And then the questions like I discussed before with you, the questions of a woman getting a leave of absence for childbearing. Well, that was more or less our work and we did that. But the other work was left to the general.

Ken: I was just wondering if other women's unions like the waitresses union and the hotel maids union, whether, even though they were AF of L, whether any of the unions with basically women workers got together to do something.

Kar: No. We never got together. Not that I know of. Not in this area.

Ken: Why not?

Kar: I couldn't tell you. Because it wasn't raised, I guess, in the unions. The AFL didn't raise the questions, and in the CIO we didn't have that type of workers. So possibly it was for that purpose that we let it slide.

Ken: I'm just guessing, and this is a wild guess, that you could do it through the unions rather than through legislation.

Kar: Certainly. They could have done a lot. All the other unions that had such grievances like we

Kar: had - the time I spoke about women getting a leave of absence and getting their seniority back. Well, the other unions could have done the same. They had an example because that was brought up in the CIO Council. And when it was brought up in the CIO council they all heard about it. It was also in the Labor Herald and in the papers, in all the papers, that we had finally gotten that extension of our contract, on that question.

Ken: In April of 1940 the East Bay Labor Journal had an article which said the CIO [Textile union] was raiding the AF of L in a Co-Op plant, and a woman named Olivia Mendoza, who was the president the Local 146, wrote a letter to the Labor Herald explaining this. Finally your union organized them and got a contract there, but I wondered what the story was.

Kar: The CIO was not raiding. That plant was not organized. When we started organizing the plant, I remember, then there was a protest that they belonged to that other group, that it didn't belong to us.

Olivia Mendoza, being at that time the president of Local 146, asked me what to do. Then we got together and had that letter drawn up and we mailed it - we are not raiding because the plant was not organized. And it wasn't organized and we felt that it should belong to us.

Ken: What happened finally?

Kar: Well, we did organize it, and we had the plant, and there was no more trouble. The Council had settled it.

Ken: What union was it, the AF of L Union?

Kar: At this time I can't even remember. I think it could have been one of the garment workers, either Amalgamated or - but they let it go because it wasn't a large factory. It was a small factory, and the CIO Council had settled it anyway.

Ken: There was a mention of AF of L tactics, and I wondered what they were.

Kar: They wanted them. After we organized them, they wanted them [laughter]. That's the tactic. Like that time at Gantber and Mattern. It was the same thing.

Ken: Now there were two women mentioned around this period, Olivia Mendoza and Marie O'Donnell.

Kar: Marie O'Donnell was the secretary of Local 71 in San Francisco, and Olivia Mendoza was the chairman of Local 146.

Ken: How did you get Marie O'Donnell to be the secretary of the union?

Kar: She was one of the people we organized in the bag industry. She came into the local, and she was very active, and she got elected.

Ken: How did you work with her?

Kar: Very well. She was a woman who was very much concerned with seeing that things are done right and she attended every meeting punctually and was a very, very good union person.

Ken: Did you have any contact with her outside of the union?

Kar: Well, we were on a friendly basis. We didn't go to each other's homes, or anything. We didn't have that much time. Whenever we met anywhere - we went to various conventions the union had, and the CIO Council, and various places, and were on a very friendly basis.

Ken: How did you help each other within the union?

Kar: In the union, any questions that came up, we discussed them. She usually asked questions on how she should settle it. And she was also shop steward of her shop. And if she had any trouble she would call me up and I would go down to the factory or she would come to the union office and we would discuss the question, and then she went back and she got it settled.

She was an elderly woman. She was older than I am. Later on before I left she left the

Kar: union because she got a stroke. And to this day I do not know if she is living or not. She was an older woman.

Ken: Tell me a little bit more about Mendoza then.

Kar: She was a younger woman and she was one of the first ones I had a lot of dealing with as far as the union was concerned, in Local 146. She came from the California Cotton Mills. And she was a very active person. She was secretary. She used to go to various conventions and council meetings, and was a very well liked woman.

Ken: Did you feel you were training them in any particular way?

Kar: I don't want to say I felt that way, but it is almost true.

Ken: You are being a little bit modest about this. I know you brought forth these women, and I want to know how you did it.

Kar: They came in green. That's true. They didn't know anything about the union movement. Naturally they stayed after the meeting and asked questions. That's the nice part of it because they were willing to learn. And I was willing to take time with them. Especially Olivia. I thought she was a younger woman and would be very necessary for the organization.

She only had one child and he was already school age so she wasn't really handicapped. And I did a lot of talking to her and we were very friendly. I used to meet her either before the meeting or after the meeting. We would discuss what's coming up and what she should get up and say. And she did, and developed into a very good union person.

Ken: And what happened to her?

Kar: Later on, as far as I know, her husband moved somewhere (lost his job or something) and she went with him. She left the union, but that was only about a year before I left. Until then

Kar: then she was still active. So we lost her.

As far as Marie O'Donnell, she left a little after I left. I left in 1959, and she left I think in 1960 because at that time she got a stroke. She was a widow, and she did need her work very badly. She had some children she was helping. When I heard she had a stroke I went to visit her. She had a home. They were buying a home when her husband was still living, and she was able to keep it. And that's as far as I know about her.

Ken: Now let's get down to Local 6. How happen Local 6 had six - in California Cotton Mills the ILWU had six warehousemen and you had three hundred textile workers, and it reminded me of what you said about Easthampton where all the textile workers had to go out because of the skilled workers -

Kar: Later on they were transferred into our local.

Ken: You did respect their picket line?

Kar: We did in the beginning. I don't remember that strike, what it was all about, but it was a warehouse strike throughout the area, and we respected the picket line.

After that we began negotiations between the warehousemen and our union to see if we couldn't have them all belonging to one organization instead of belonging to two. And we felt the warehousemen should come in [to the textile] provided every time we would sign for conditions that they had in the area. They agreed, and later on we had them all in our union.

Ken: What I would like to know is, when this strike happened and you had three hundred workers, what were the arrangements between the warehouse local and you. Did they talk with you ahead of time?

Kar: They did. They came and they discussed the question - that they are going to pull out the

Kar: warehousemen and that it is up to us to support them, and we did. Joint Board

Ken: I got the information on how you became Pacific Coast Director of the Textile, but never did find out how the joint board was set up.

Kar: That was an easy thing. We had three locals, and finally decided that three locals have to be administered, and no local can afford to have a separate business agent. So we had to have one. And if we had one - a policy was had throughout all the textile in other places where they were close by, groups, that they organize into a council - a joint board as they called it. We did the same thing here. We called it a joint board of the three locals.

Ken: How did it function?

Kar: We had delegates from each local, so many delegates, meeting once a month and discussing the general question of the textile. We had a chairman and a secretary, and I was the business agent of the joint board.

Ken: What was the difference between business agent and manager. You were both, weren't you?

Kar: It is supposed to be a manager, but more or less it was a business agent because each local did not have their own business agent. It was a double function, being a business agent for a particular local and being a joint board manager for three locals.

Ken: I see. Now I get it. I get utterly confused sometimes. I think we touched this briefly - I think you answered it. I asked what you had to do with sports.

Kar: Yes, I answered that.

State Industrial Union Council

Ken: Now you were elected to the State Industrial Union Council for the second time. When you dropped out the first time, why did you come in again the second time?

Kar: The first time, when I dropped out I had a lot of travelling to do, and I felt that I will not be around so much. So I dropped out. Then I was more stable, stationed here, so I decided I can again be on it if I am elected. and I was elected.

Ken: You were elected from your local to go?

Kar: To go, but as Council Vice President you are elected by the group there, not textile locals, but all CIO locals.

Ken: How did being on the Council help you in your organizational and union work?

Kar: When we had a hard time in negotiating we had a CIO man come and help. From the CIO there was always somebody who could come and help negotiate. We didn't ask very many times. But several times I remember we did have him come and help us with the employers.

Ken: Let's see now. In Indianapolis Bemis Bag signed a contract. And in San Francisco Local 71 had been working under a statement of policy. What was a statement of policy.

Kar: A statement of policy was the company did not agree to sign a union contract. Their policy was they will never sign a union contract. They will agree to certain things and they will live by it, but the agreement, they will not sign. That was a statement of policy of the Bemis. We had the same conditions, identical as other groups like Pacific Bag, like Ames Harris Neville Bag and other bag companies. They agreed they will go by their contract and call it a policy, but they will not sign anything with us.

Later on, after several negotiations went by, they finally signed.

We had that happen, I remember, in one other factory. I think it was one of the curtain factories if I am not mistaken. The employer was not entirely an employer here, just a manager for somebody else, and he couldn't very well sign.

Kar; because the company was opposed and his hands were tied. He just couldn't sign a contract. So he asked us if we wouldn't accept a policy - that he would agree to whatever the others were doing. So we also let it go for one contract. After that we had it with them.

Ken: I see. There were more women than men on the negotiating committees for most of your contracts. How did negotiating committees work?

Kar: Negotiating committees get together with the employer. The employer comes in the meeting. We have either from every factory, if it is a joint negotiation. If it is a negotiation for the factory only, then we have from the departments. Usually there are a majority of women, so there were a majority of women on these negotiations.

Then we sit down with the employer and we discuss the things that we want him to agree with, and sign a contract. So that's negotiation.

Ken: Were these effective, the negotiating committees?

Kar: Certainly they were effective.

Ken: Would you recommend them today?

Kar: Some I would. Of course there's always a few that you wouldn't. But the majority were very conscientious, very nice people, very conscientious. They felt that they are there for the rest of those that have elected them. They stood pat on what they wanted. At times it was a very hard negotiation because I could see where we would not be able to get certain things. The workers on the floor [the union floor] brought it up, They wanted. You have to put it in, but you can see at times some things are not negotiable at all. And it is hard to convince these people that you have to go back to your people and tell them we couldn't get that. It is impossible at this time. Maybe later on. Maybe things will change, but right now we can't. It is very, very hard to convince them because they were afraid to go before their own

Kar: group and say they can't get it.

Ken: I would just like your opinion on this because I think today there are hardly any rank and file negotiating committees. There are attorneys and union officials and so forth, and I wondered what you thought of that.

Kar: That's a pity. I think that's one of the best things. The employer himself gets convinced when he is sitting with the workers from his own factory. He is convinced that these workers have discussed this question. They know it. They want it. It is much better than for a committee to come back to these workers cold and say well they won't give it to you. They didn't hear what the employer had to say.

I think it is the most wonderful thing. Wherever I was, in the East and here, we have always had a committee of the workers.

Sometimes they don't speak a word. They just sit there. They listen. They know. And when we go back on the floor somebody will get up, "Oh you're for the bosses." or, "Why don't you tell us what the bosses said?" Well, these workers would get up and say. They will back you up in a case like that.

Ken: Then you believe in open negotiations.

Kar: I do, open negotiations. I think everybody has their say. The employers has his say, and the employees hear it, and the employees have their say on why they want it. Not only the business agent speaks for them, but they speak for themselves, which is very important. If I had to do it over again now in organizing, I would always have a big committee of the workers.

Ken: I agree with you. Let's see, later on in 1940 - you don't mind my saying dates because I read the papers, and I think it is easier for you to remember.

Kar: Yes. It probably is.

Ken: In November of 1940 the Lane Cotton Mills in

Ken: the South was hailed as the "most significant steps thus far in the organization of the South." That is in quotes. How did this affect you in California?

Kar: It didn't. We had better conditions in spite of what they wrote there. For them it was very good, for the South. What they negotiated was good. But for us, it didn't affect us at all, except when we went to the employer and said, "Well, they organized the South now. This ought to help you."

Ken: How did it work in reverse then. How did your organizing here help them back East?

Kar: It did. Because Rieve and those that negotiated could point out our contract, which were better. And not because we were smarter. I don't want to leave that impression, but because we lived in this area which was very well organized, and all the other unions had better contracts. And the wages here generally were better. The standard of living was higher, so the wages were better. Naturally it was easier for us to squeeze that out of the employers here. So when they went down into the South they could put that forward as an example that in the same type of a mill the workers are getting this and why can't we get it there. But to us it was no help at all.

Ken: Now we're past 1940. In March 1941 in the Executive Board minutes the Board had voted a subsidy for organization of a firm in Los Angeles, and then the Council had asked the Textile union to assume the responsibility for maintaining a full time organizer in L.A. What was your part in this? I remember your telling me that finally got a full time organizer.

Kar: Because of this we brought a request before the whole textile union and asked them to send somebody there because a person from here could not stay there. You see I went there off and on and I had to come back and the thing would fall apart. So we

Kar: asked them send an organizer. They finally assigned an organizer.

Ken: And who was that?

Kar: His name was Gatewood. I don't remember his first name.

Ken: Is he the one that didn't work out?

Kar: No, he didn't. That was the first one, though, that they assigned. Then later on they had others which I lost track of

Ken: Now in June of 1941 the Joint Board mentioned women were working on men's jobs and got the same pay. Was this difficult to get?

Kar: It was difficult to get because the employers aid while they are producing the same and while they are working on the same type of job, however they can't lift as much. the law didn't permit -

End of side one

Begin side two

Kar: women to lift over fifty pounds at that time here. So we had quite a squabble with the employer over that. So finally we agreed that if men and women are working during the period that they have to do any lifting the men would be permitted to get off the machine and do the lifting, ~~xxx~~ while the ~~xxxx~~ ^{women} continued working. And we worked it out.

On some of the other jobs it was not necessary. there was no lifting. But where the work was necessary to lift, we finally went around that question and they got the same pay for the same work.

Ken: This was interesting to me because this was six months before the war and although industry had picked up some during that period it wasn't until after the war that women sometimes got equal pay on a general national scale. So you were almost ahead of your time in this.

Kar: We were.

Ken: What brought it up?

Kar: Women brought it up themselves. They came to the union and said why can't we get the same wages as men. We produce just as much and even more, and we are not getting the same wages. So we put that in as one of the things that we have to negotiate with the employer. And the employers went along with us, that we have it.

However on some of the jobs later on, I understand, in Ames Harris Neville they changed the jobs a little bit and they wouldn't pay equally for men and women saying that the State of California does not require that. Which it didn't. It didn't say we have to get the same pay for the same work, as women.

Ken: So what happened then?

Kar: I left then. I don't know.

Ken: Oh, this was in nineteen fifty nine?

Kar: Just before I left, so I don't know whether they finally got it or whether they didn't. And I understand the factory had moved in the meantime. Ames Harris Neville moved to Fresno or around that area. Though if they moved out, naturally they probably didn't even have a union. I don't know.

Ken: This is a question I had meant to ask you at the beginning; I have a little scrawl of a note here. I don't think I am putting words in your mouth, but I feel there was a difference in women who came up from the ranks and other women, and I wonder if you felt it was easier for you to organize than e oh I remember we were talking about Dubinsky or none of the people from the New York locals could go in the South because, or even New England, they knew people wouldn't accept them. They were New York people with accents and with beards. They were not the same kind of people. So they were very smart. They hired college women and women

Ken: from the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] to go in and organize. What I want is do you know any of these women, and what was the difference between the way they organized and the way you organized? Or Anne Burlak organized, say?

Kar: Well Anne Burlak, I think she knew how to organize the same way as we were organizing. But I don't know about the others. I don't have any opinion of how they organized. I mean I was never there with them or saw any of the organization.

For us here, in the area here, it was not hard no matter who came to organize. Because the people here accepted them all. You see there was so such a think as American workers. Some of the younger might have been born here, but most of them were foreign born people that were working in this particular industry. Like the bag industry, they were mostly Spanish. And Ames Harris Neville they were mostly Spanish, but some were American. It was the biggest American shop we had. But all the others were mostly foreign born people working, or they had foreign born parents. So we didn't have that conflict that the South had.

You see in the South they were more American people working, American women and American men. When we say American, they were probably born here and working all their lives, like their parents. It's a change.

Later on we had a lot of Black people come in, and although they were Americans, they still had a different ideology. They were more allied to the foreigners, you see. So we got along very nicely here. There was no trick to organizing here at all.

Ken: Well, let me ask this question then. You were in contact with women from other backgrounds in committees like the CIO Industrial Union Council and other organizations. How did you relate to

Ken: them in those fields?

Kar: I had very little contact outside of the meetings at these various councils or wherever I met them, because somehow our paths didn't cross. I was organizing the workers in the factories and I was a member of the Council. I brought out my reports on what I was doing as they did what they were doing. Personally I knew them, but outside of that I had no contact with their work.

Ken: I guess that's about it then. OK, now let's get to Petaluma. In July of 1941 the textile workers in Petaluma asked to affiliate with local 6 [ILWU], and you turned them over. Why was this?

Kar: It was too hard for us to service them. They were way off - a fifty mile trip from San Francisco and back. And I didn't always have time to just keep running over there.

It was hard to organize them in the first place because they were all men. Naturally they were very skeptical at times, and they wanted to know why can't they belong to a men's organization. So finally we decided to let them go to ILWU.

Ken: Tell me the problems you had in organizing them.

Kar: I didn't have too much trouble organizing them. They were skeptical, but they joined. They joined and they wanted to know if they would get conditions like the men get, and I said "We are not going to get you women's wages, small wages. You are working here as men, and you are going to get the wages." We had a meeting with the employer where they all sat in, the entire group. There weren't many of them. I think there were about twenty five at the time, I don't remember exactly. Anyway they all sat around the table listening. And we did draw up a contract which was not bad.

However my service was very hard. I could only

Kar: go about once a month. In the meantime they would raise questions. Sometimes work was interfered with, or something of that sort came up, and they thought, why should I do it, and the other fellow should do it. You know, union people, they felt they had to have their jobs set for them. So I had a very hard time with them, getting there and getting the things settled whenever I could.

Finally we talked it over in the Joint Board and decided it was best that we let them go to Local 6, or whatever it was.

Ken: Yes. Local 6 had a branch in Petaluma.

Kar: So we let them go, and that was the end of that.

Ken: Ok. In November of 1941 Pollack and Anderson came to L.A. to help local 71 to help in the bag and canvas industry, why was this?

Kar: Wait a minute. It was not Local 71. Local 71 was in San Francisco.

Ken: I have it in my notes. It was either an error or - well, did they come here?

Kar: Yes. They came here. They came to Local 71 because we got to the point where negotiations with the bag industry were beginning to be very very hard because some of the bag industries were not organized around Fresno and Los Angeles. They were not organized yet and were making much less money. Also some other places. I don't remember where they were. But the employers just sat there and said "Well, I can't pay any more because those are the people that are competing with us. And if you people insist on that we are either going to have to close or move. We can't afford to pay any more." So we had quite a squabble, and I wrote to Pollack and asked if they could help us somehow because we came to an impasse which we can't do anything about. So They came to help us negotiate. And I think we had a short strike at that time at Bemis and Pacific. They went out on strike. We negotiated the same contracts for all of them. We signed separately, but

Kar: they were identical contracts. So they all helped by putting on that pressure.

Ken; Did the bag industry in L.A. finally get organized?

Kar: They did. Some, the I.L.W.U. got ahold of and organized. And the others were organized by textile. Somehow I lost track of that because they [the Textile International] sent an organizer there. I didn't go any more, but I heard they kept organizing. First the I.L.W.U. would transfer to the Textile and they the Textile would transfer something to the I.L.W.U. I don't know how that exchange was being made. However, they were in the Textile and they got better conditions. They didn't get them identical to ours. They got better conditions, and they were able to settle our strike too. That way we settled our strike. But that was in Los Angeles.

Ken: Well, I guess I wrote down Los Angeles instead of San Francisco.

We discussed this waste material thing, and they finally got a contract. What was Pollock's reaction to Local 26 taking over that.

Kar: I don't know. We didn't have any waste materials here.

Ken: I mean, you had in Los Angeles, and I.L.W.U. 26 took it over.

Kar: And they took it over, and I think it was permitted for them to take it.

Ken: Did you discuss this with the International before it happened?

Kar: At the time I was there they weren't organized. There were a couple of small places organized by the I.L.W.U. and the Textile thought it belonged to them, and I ~~xxxxxx~~ did too, and we were talking about organizing them. After that I don't know. I wasn't there.

Ken: Oh, I see, because I know that Local 6 did organize them.

Kar: They did have some already when we started talking.

Kar: But I don't know. I wasn't there.

Ken: I see. I just wondered what happened because Local 26 did organize them and signed a contract.

Kar: They did have some already when we started talking.

Ken: In November of 1941 they evidently got them all organized and signed a contract. I wondered how Pollock felt about it, and Rieve.

Kar: When they came over there they thought they would settle it, but they couldn't because we didn't have them organized. So they must have left them to the I.L.W.U.

Ken: Were you still writing during this period? You had written one book.

Kar: Yes. I was still writing. Another pamphlet I wrote - Women and War.

Ken: This wasn't the war yet - December 7, 1941, yes.

Kar: I started writing as the women went into factories. That's the time that the Black women kept coming here, more and more, and it gave me an incentive to write about women and war. Of course, it wasn't just about us. It was for women of the U.S.A. in general.

Ken: That was for what paper?

Kar: It was issued in New York, the pamphlet in Lithuanian.

Ken: It wasn't printed in the Lithuanian women's paper?

Kar; No. It was issued as a pamphlet.

Ken: Did it ever get translated into English.

Kar: No, but I understand that some of these women who weretravelling around, they used parts of it because I had facts and figures there of all kinds, how Rosie the Riveter started.

Ken: Do you have copies of that pamphlet?

Kar: Somewhere around yes.

Ken: I would like to get one. You know, you were writing a column for the Labor Herald and you stopped writing it. All of a sudden it wasn't there any more. Why did you stop writing it?

Kar: I don't know. Possibly I didn't have time or something. I don't know. There wasn't any particular purpose.

Ken: Immediately before the war you wrote a book called Women in War.

Kar: That was not a book - a pamphlet.

Ken: Oh, that was a pamphlet.

Kar: Not before the war. When the war started.

Ken: Oh, that was the name of the pamphlet we were talking about. I see.

Kar: Then later on I wrote a couple more.

Ken: Good lord, when did you have time to do this?

Kar: Well, evenings.

Ken: You mean after your meetings at 2 o'clock in the morning [laughter]?

Kar: Right. I was not a woman who would crochet or knit. Those days are gone, I think. Even now for the paper.

I asked that the recorder be shut off so we could read an article Ms. Kaross had written recently]

Ken: You just showed me a Lithuanian paper with something you wrote. Were you writing for this paper during the war too?

Kar: Yes. I was writing right along for that paper.

Ken: Were you writing for the English section or the Lithuanian section?

Kar: The Lithuanian section, and I kept up a women's section in that paper for a long time in the Lithuanian language, and writing in the English section also for that paper.

Ken: What was in the women's section?

Kar: Oh, things that happened, quotes of what women are doing. Whenever anything happens in factories where women are working or whether it is women for peace, or whatever it might be.

Ken: I see. I don't know whether I asked you this or not. How did you feel about the Nazi Soviet non intervention pact?

Kar: At this time I would have to think what it is. Generally know that we had a discussion around that pact. You mean these late ones?

Ken: No. We are talking about the war years now, and just

Ken: before the United States got involved in the war the Russians and the Nazis signed a non aggression pact. Then the Nazi's broke it. When it was signed a lot of the people who were left wing were rather upset about the fact that the Russians had signed a pact with the Nazis.

Kar: Well, they might have been at the time, ^{and still is} But they did that as a stop gap for what is going to happen. They were pushed against the wall at the time and had to do something like that. And it showed later just what it was. They never believe in the Nazis and later on they showed the Nazis that they could revise themselves and push them off.

Ken: When the Nazi's attacked the Soviet Union, what was your reaction?

Kar: Well we felt bad. Our people especially. All of our people felt bad because that was the second time they felt that the Nazis are going to go through the fatherland which is Lithuania, Poland and so on.

Ken: So, what did you do about it?

Kar; We had meetings. We talked about it. We wrote in the paper. I had written some articles. Some others had written telling the people what to look for. We had faith that eventually they will push the Nazis out.

Ken: What was your reaction to Pearl Harbor? Where were you
KXXX when it happened?

Kar: I was in a union meeting and somebody told me, ran up and said, "Did you hear the latest? Pearl Harbor is bombed." That was a shock. And the reaction was that something has got to be done now to see that the war doesn't go any further. We've got to do something about it. We had meetings after that, mass meetings. In the union we had meetings. All the people felt that now we have to concentrate and see that we win this war, finish winning the war.

Ken ; How did you react to the Japanese internment?

Kar: It was unjust. Very much ~~xxx~~ unjust. We had discussion on that in the union, although we didn't have

Kar: any Japanese in our Union. But all of us had a friend here and there. We had a meeting one time. At the Council one time there was a discussion, at the CIO Council on that issue. And then we had meetings at the various mass organizations that we belonged to. And we all felt it was so unjust because many of them were born here, people that were living here for years. If they did that, why didn't they do the same thing to all the Germans who came from Germany. It was so unjust. After Pearl Harbor it didn't mean tha the Japanese here without arms would do anything, those that were living here.

Ken: Were you able to do anything about it?

Kar: Well, we wrote letters to our Representatives in Congress, and here also locally in the State of California. We told them that we feel it is unjust. That some thing has got to be done to stop it.

Ken: How did you involve you union in your war work

Kar: First we started with donating blood. We had a committee which asked various shops of our union if they couldn't get a group. And we would take them over and see that they give at least a pint of blood. From our Joint Board we elected a woman who would coordinate this work. She was Lois Keefe. So we did have quite a few people who had given blood.

Ken: Oh, Lois Keefe. That was another woman I was going to ask you about a little later.

Kar: She came from the ranks of our union. When she went to school she learned a little bit of bookkeeping and stenography. And then when we needed somebody in the office she applied for the job. We gave it to her, and she worked out very find. A very nice person. And later on we needed more help with all these shops I wasn't able to be very active in each one of them. We finally elected her as a business agent to help me. She did a very nice job.

Ken: The Joint Board elected her?

Kar: The Joint Board.

Ken: How did you work with her?

Kar: Very well with her. I assigned her certain jobs.

Kar: At times we had two or three negotiations going on at the same time. I had to take the one I thought was the hardest. And then I would send her over, for instance, like the curtain negotiations or some other which she handled pretty well.

Ken: Regarding union work - was it easier or harder to organize during the war?

Kar: There wasn't so much organizing left in the textile by that time. Most of the shops that we were able to organize were organized. So we were just holding our own and seeing that our contracts were not made any worse.

Ken: I see. I notice that a tremendous number of people from the International were in and out of the Coast here. Why was that?

Kar: What?

Ken: People from your International were coming here and going back. It seemed every time I turned around I saw the name of some International official.

Kar: That's true. Because of Los Angeles mostly. And then they would stop by here. They came to our joint board meetings and sort of pepped us up too. It was because of organizing in Los Angeles. It was a hard nut to crack. The whole city was very poorly organized. Naturally the textile was bucking the union very much.

And then it didn't work out with the business representative that they sent. They sent one person. Then they sent another, and it didn't work out very well. So naturally the International had to come here.

Ken: Why didn't they ask you to train them?

Kar: I couldn't - you would have to train somebody locally. Somebody the people would know and trust. And I think if they did that, if they had taken time from the beginning to do that, they would have gotten along much better. I told them that, but they kept sending somebody.

In the first place, when you send a new man

Kar: the people somehow don't trust you. You have to work with them before they begin to trust you. So that's why we had quite a few at certain times.

Then later, just before I quit the job [1959], it was very hard for me to work because a couple of the people here locally wanted to have a man instead of myself elected. They couldn't take me off. It was a yearly election. I never campaigned or anything. And they always put up some man or other, and at times they even got a man from outside, one of the International men, to come here and run against me. And yet the people always voted me in.

It was pretty tough them getting on my neck and all that. And it was getting so my age was hurting me, or whatever you call it, so I decided I am going to quit, and I quit. I ~~wasn't~~ wasn't even getting social security yet. I couldn't get it.

Ken: You got a lot of wage raises, of course, during the war. Was there any difference between - I mean you negotiations with the employers were run a certain way. How were negotiations run after the war?

Kar: No. There wasn't any difference. Every time you go there they were not making money, they were going to move. And they kept staying. Finally after 1958 and 1959 they started moving out. The rope factory moved out. The bag factories moved out. But prior to that it was always the same thing so nobody believed them.

Ken: I just thought there would be a difference in methods of negotiation because of the war.

Kar: No. It was the same.

Ken: How did you feel about the War Labor Board and government control of wages and hours?

Kar: At that time I felt it was all right so long as they controlled both. I thought that was all right if it was both ways.

Ken: What did you have to do with government agencies?

Kar: I didn't have any except when we had to go before some of these boards when we had a tough time

Kar: negotiating - the War Labor Board - Then we had arbitration. And we asked them to send us an arbitrator several times. We had to have an arbitrator about four times I remember. We had one in cotton mills negotiations, and we had a couple in the bag industry.

End of tape

OK
11/3/77
STBK

Labor Women Series

California Historical Society

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Thursday, September 1, 1977, at home
of Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin: Tape #10 - page 209 - counter #1

Ken: Did they have incentive plans in your shops?

Kar: No. We did away with them in all our negotiations
in the beginning.

Ken: Why.

Kar: The people didn't like it. They didn't want to
work harder than they ordinarily do. And they
felt that it was not to their advantage, although
it would have been if they made more money. They
felt they would be more tired. They never wanted it
and they had none, not in any of our shops.

Ken: Before the war it would have been considered speed up,
and you would have fought against it.

Kar: Yes.

Ken: Were you on - yes you were on an AFL CIO Committee
to plan better production on the home front.

Kar: Yes, but that didn't affect us because we weren't
in a war industry. We were not in a war industry
at all.

Ken: But you were working with unions that were in the
war industry, so they needed your opinion on things.

Kar: Certain things we opposed. Certain things we agreed
upon. In war industry we agreed if possible that if
the workers were asked to do something particularly
important that they should try and help. In non war
industries this was absolutely voted out in our
committee at that time. They didn't believe in doing
any more than they were doing because everybody
had their norm set, and they wanted to continue on
those norms.

Ken: What about use of minorities and women - were they -

Kar: As I say, it didn't affect our particular industry

Kar: because we didn't work in war industry. Those that were war industries, working in shipyards and so on, there was talk that we should go before these people and see that they don't waste unnecessarily the time because some of them would go to the washroom many times, and all that, and ask them to cooperate as much as possible to get the ships out or whatever was necessary. That was the gist of the meetings.

Ken: How were you able to apply all these things to your locals?

Kar: There wasn't any. It wasn't necessary. There was no need.

Ken: What did you think of strikes during wartime?

Kar: Well. They were unavoidable. That's the way I felt, and I agreed with some of them. The ILWU had a few, and some of the other unions. It was unavoidable because the employer knowing that the people are willing to help the war effort, they pushed them too much. And so some of this resulted in strikes. Naturally we had to go along with the people - not had to, but we agreed.

Ken: How could you determine whether a strike wouldn't hurt or would hurt the war effort?

Kar: Well, it depends who was on strike. The office workers went out on strike during the time I was in the CIO Council. And the factories, or wherever the strikes were from, came and asked the CIO Council to stop it, to have them go back. So the Council refused. And I was on the committee discussing the question. And we felt it was unjust because it had nothing to do with the war effort. And strikes were still permitted except in the war industries where we tried to settle without strikes.

Ken: But if you couldn't settle?

Kar: If we couldn't settle, then they had to settle by a strike. In war industries there was always arbitration and various other ways.

Ken: Now I know that you didn't have any discrimination in your local and you had minorities coming in at the begining of the war. How did women from the South come into your plants?

Kar: Through the agencies. When our employers had to have workers they applied to agencies for help and when these women came in from the South they were directed to go to our factories. Especially the cotton mill. It started first. Then the bag factories. Quite a few women came in during that period. Not so many men. They were women.

Ken: What did they do before they came into the factory?

Kar: We don't know. They came from the deep South - Alabama and all those places. They probably worked in the fields. As much as I know some of them worked in cotton mills, or picking cotton in the South before they came here to work.

And they were accepted very nicely by the people. We had no discrimination of any kind.

Ken: Did they have any particular problems when they came here that you knew about?

Kar: No. They had no particular problems. They got immediately places to live.

Ken: Did they come into the union with any of their problems?

Kar: No. Well. They were no different than anybody else. They did have the problem sometimes of paying the rent and they wanted to know what they could do about it, the same as the white people that worked in the cotton mills even before them. We had a committee, and sometimes the committee would ask the owner to let it stand for a while and until the person could pick up.

Ken: What kind of a committee?

Kar: We had a welfare committee in the local in the beginning. Afterwards the dommittee was dropped because there was no need. But in the beginning of the war we did have such a committee because quite a few people couldn't pay their rent. Or some of them would have trouble with their family

Kar: and one would move out and the other one couldn't pay, or couldn't take care of the children, or something. So we had a committee that went before the welfare and asked for help and so on. That was for several years, and it worked very well. At the time Black people were coming in we helped them with getting housing and so on.

Ken: I just wondered because these women who had faced real discrimination in the South meeting and working and coming to meetings with women of another race, it might be difficult for them.

Kar: No. Here it wasn't. In fact in Continental I think the majority of stewards in different departments were Black women. And before we even got the dues checked off. You know the employer checked off the dues for the union. In the beginning we didn't. The women even collected the dues in their department for the union. They helped out in that manner. We never lost any dues, or any money, or anything. It worked very well.

Ken: Were they able to take up grievances?

Kar: They took up grievances. They weren't able to in the beginning. They used to call on me to go in. But later on if it didn't develop into big trouble they did it themselves - went into the employer and said there is such and such a grievance in my department and we want to settle it. And somehow here we had a feeling the employers didn't discriminate in any way. It worked very nicely.

In fact we had a president later on of the Local 146 - a Black man. We had joint board delegates Black men and women. We had a lot of Mexicans. Pretty near all of them were of minority races.

Ken: So there was no ill feeling between the minority races?

Kar: No. None at all. I was very proud to report that in the council.

Ken: You talked a little bit about the employers. How did they try to take advantage of the war situation to make more money?

Kar: I don't think they did. Only in negotiations they used to bring that up. "Why do you want more money? The government says we should stay put." But in no other way.

Ken: Well, how did the no strike pledge affect your getting better conditions?

Kar: The employers used this a lot. It didn't affect us. We did strike because we felt we weren't in a war industry and it didn't affect us. But the employers thought it did; that it should affect us because it was said that there should be no strikes. We had strikes.

Ken: Oh, you did?

Kar: Yes. We had strikes in the bag industry. We had almost a strike in the cotton mill, for a day, and then we came back. We had the National Automotive Fibres also organized, and we had a strike there. They weren't of long duration. We settled them very quickly within a week or so. We told the employer, "Now, hold your horses, this is not for us it is for the war effort. And you are not doing anything for the war effort, and therefore we want to settle it. And if we can't settle it, we'll strike. So we settled [laughter] but they tried to use it very much, and told us that we shouldn't strike.

Ken: How did you in your local, or any group within the CIO, work toward post war planning?

Kar: That was a very good committee working from both Councils [State and San Francisco]. They had a working committee for post war job efforts for people that were unemployed, that were thrown out of the war industries and so on. We had very good committees and we had very good contact with various public people on that score. And even contact with the State officials during that period. I am not speaking now of my local. I am speaking generally of the CIO. We put out a lot of leaflets and had a lot of meetings on that score explaining what we could do and what the government should do.

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Kar: No. There was a business agent, a local person who was not adequate enough. But the International had nobody there at the time. So later on they sent somebody in and negotiated with the Furniture Workers, and the question was settled.

Ken: In other words this was a separate local in Los Angeles and the Furniture Workers helped them because there was nobody else there to help them.

Kar: That's right. The people asked because they were scared that there was nobody to take care of them. That's why they asked the Furniture to take over.

Ken: I see. The Furniture Workers weren't in effect raiding you then?

Kar: No. They were not raiding.

Ken: ~~MaxxKxxx~~ And the meeting you had up here was an amicable one?

Kar: It was settled at that meeting that just as soon as somebody was able to take hold in Los Angeles that there will be no trouble; that they will switch it back, which was done.

Ken: What relationship did you have with the State Industrial Welfare Commission on setting up of minimum wages?

Kar: I didn't have very much. We were getting the State minimum whatever it was at the time. So naturally the State could not help us on any of the minimum.

Ken: So you didn't have contact with them then?

Kar: I had contact with them because at times they had called various unions. And I remember a conference where they asked each union what their minimum is, whether it was up to standard or not. And those that were up to standard, they couldn't do anything. And ours was up to standard, the State standard.

Ken: Did you do any more writing during this period? Did you write any more books?

Kar: I've forgotten what year it was. The one on women's struggle for equality, that was written later.

Ken: That was in Lithuanian too?

Kar: Yes. It is easier for me. You see I had so little

Kar: education in english it is hard for me to write a book in english, so I wrote in Lithuanian.

Ken: You do pretty well now. I can see that.

Kar: Only articles. That is easier.

Ken: A book is only a bunch of articles. Now I have a question here about women in the war. There is a theory advanced that women really don't make very good union members because they are mainly interested in their home, their husband, and so forth. What do you think.

Kar: They did. Those that were in the union, they were excellent. We couldn't have had a better local ~~than~~ if we had a men's local, I don't believe, than what we had with a women's local. They weren't all womrn, but they were the majority. In all the locals that I had, and I had no complaint. They were very good union people.

Ken: This theory is not a very valid one then?

Kar: No. I don't think so. I disagree. It depends, I think, on how they are trained in the locals, and how they are trained to work in the unions. That doesn't mean going to school. That means that the meeting isn't just got to be you open the meeting with a gavel, and ask for any trouble, and shut it. You have to have a discussion and bring out the various points in the local. We would open the meeting and ask, "Is there anything to bring up before this meeting what happened in the factories?" So somebody would bring up. So we would have a discussion, and these people would learn from those disussions what the union was doing. And naturally they were good union people. They were on their toes all the time. If anything was wrong in their particular department at the next meeting they would bring it up if it wasn't serious. If it was was something serious they would bring it up to the shop committee, and they want it settled right now. If it was something that was just developing they would bring it up in the local meeting.

Kar: I felt that they were very true, good union people, both men and women, but I am speaking more for the women because the majority were women. I really was proud of my local. I was. [laughter].

Ken: You have every right to be. How did you work with other women in the trade union movement like Sandra Martin and Luisa Moreno? For a while you were the only woman on the Executive Board [of the State Industrial Union Council] and then suddenly in 1944 these two women came on.

Kar: We didn't have anything special that we would work together. We worked on the entire Council.

Ken: How well did you know Luisa Moreno?

Kar: Just by meeting her at Council meetings.

Ken: I understand she was quite a tremendous woman.

Kar: She must have been, but I never had personal contact with her.

Ken: What about Sandra Martin?

Kar: The same with her. In the Council, but outside of that we were strangers.

Ken: In the Council itself, did you tend to get together on specific issues relating to women, or not?

Kar: No, unless some local would raise it. It was general union work that came up.

Ken: In 1941 the Vice President of the Textile Workers, a guy names Turner, emphasized the need to bring women into activity on a national defense program, you know improved conditions, equal pay, etc. and a lot of meetings were held. Were you involved in any of those meetings?

Kar: No.

Ken: You knew about the program?

Kar: Yes, I did.

Ken: How were you able to implement it?

Kar: It was implemented here, so we had no improvement to make on that.

Ken: I see. Now during the war there were a lot of special problems because husbands weren't around. What did

Ken: your union do about special problems women had during the war like child care, sanitary conditions on the job, hot meals for children, and housing, on the job training - all these specific things that women needed?

Kar: They didn't need them any more during the war period than they needed them before. So nothing was done. They had no help for that. Nothing was done. Cities didn't have it [child care] so they did their own the best they could. They had their children with grandparents or older people, or some old woman on the block taking care of them. And many of them were just on the street until the mother came home. And there was no program of any kind in the city. And we couldn't get any more during that period naturally.

Ken: Did you try to initiate anything to help?

Kar: No. It never came up and sorry to say we just neglected that. We could have probably raised a lot of issues on that because the majority being women in the union. But somehow they never brought that up as a grievance of any kind.

Ken: That's interesting. Why do you think that was?

Kar: Was it because they had bigger families?

Probably it was. As you say, bigger families. You know foreign born people somehow stick together. I think that one helped the other and that is why it was never brought up. It was never brought up in other unions because there was never a discussion in the Council or anywhere. You see you had to work that through legislation to get something done about children's care programs, and it wasn't done. There wasn't much of a discussion anyway.

Ken: Oh, I see the names of a couple of more women here. Florence Schlipff and Ruby Boyes. Who were they?

Kar: Ruby Boyes was Ruby Heide later.

Ken: What connection did she have with your local?

Kar: She didn't have any connection. She had connections in the Council. She worked in the Council, the Oakland Council.

Ken: Yes. I remember that.

Kar: I knew her very well. She died of cancer.

Ken: She was a very intelligent woman.

Kar: ?Very much, and Paul Heide was a very good union person.

Ken: What about this Florence Schlipff?

Kar: She was also the wife of the Secretary.

Ken: Oh, Paul Schlipff. They got into the union movement through marriage?

Kar: I don't know what they did before. I only knew them when they were working with their husbands.

Ruby did much more. I don't remember Florence doing much.

Ken: By the way, was there much of a question of absenteeism in your shops?

Kar: We brought that up several times. Yes. The women used to stay home. The child would get sick, or they would have their period or something and they would stay home. A lot of them couldn't work because they were pretty ill on account of that. So we took it up several times that this is not a war factory, but the employers are kicking, so you people better stick more to the job if you possibly can. That was brought up in that manner.

Ken: What was considered war work and not war work. I am a little confused on that.

Kar: War work is anything that was helping. Of course the bag employers tried to tell us that they were war industry because the bags were to put sand in in building trenches or something. So in a way maybe it was, to a little extent. Especially ours here. Maybe in some bigger factories down south, jute and jute mills and all that. But they used to bring that up, that we were a war industry. But we didn't really feel we were much of a one.

Ken: Why I've got this in here I don't know. Guess I forgot to ask it before, and just put it in here. Was there a difference, if any, if the way you organized women and the way you organized men?

Kar: When I appeared before a factory and talked to them, no matter if it was men or women I talked to, it was the same - that you people should have a union and that this is a union town, and that you could get better conditions, and anything that is wrong, you can correct it easier.

End of first side of tape

Second side of tape #10

Counter #1

Ken: I want to get back to your war work a little bit. We discussed some about ~~XX~~Keefe being in charge of war work in the local.

Kar: What do you want to know about it.

Ken: I want to know a little bit more about it. For instance tell me why you gave eighteen pints of blood because if I don't ask you you are not going to say anything.

Kar: In the first place, Mrs. Keefe was assigned because we had to have coordination with those that wanted to give their blood, and with the blood bank that they would have time to accept them. And so that the employer would let them off from work. And they did. We got the employers to let a group go, and when they came back to have another group go from different factories. So somebody had to take care of that. Naturally Mrs. Keefe was the proper person. She had more time, being the office worker for the Joint Board. And she was assigned as a coordinator for the war effort.

We got quite a few people that went once or twice. She was in charge of the pins she gave to those who went there, and she took a couple of groups over.

As far as myself - I had already started before that. Had given quite a few pints before that, and then I continued giving every six weeks.

Ken: Every six weeks?

Kar: Every six weeks until I gave three gallons and one quart, or something. I gave more after that too.

Kar: At the time of eighteen pints was when they gave me a special pin. They had this photographer there, and everything,

Ken: When the International sent you a letter?

Kar: Yes. The International. And I got one from the State Congressman, and I got one from the Congress of the U.S.A.

Ken: Did it affect you physically?

Kar: No. The last time I gave, the eighteenth time, there was a navy doctor there. When he heard about it and saw them taking pictures, and all those pints in front of me (those weren't all mine, it was for the picture), [laughter] he came up and said, "Can I talk to you afterwards?" And I stayed after and he took my pulse and took my blood pressure and everything else, and asked me a lot of questions on what I'm doing, what I'm eating, and all that. See my blood was taken whole. It was a different type, a type which they could inject whole, not the type to be made in plasma. Then he ~~XXXXXX~~ sat down with me and said, "You know, it won't be hard on you, and when you grow older it won't affect you in any way." He said, "You are changing your complete system." And he said, "That's not bad." He said, of course everybody couldn't do it, but as far as you are concerned, "If you are scared" (he thought maybe I was scared) don't be, because it will not affect you." And I feel today that it hasn't affected me one way or the other as far as that is concerned. And he told me that when my time comes, menopause, he said it was going to be very easy, which it was.

Ken: How about the women in your local. Did the fact that you gave eighteen pints give them the impetusto give more.

Kar: Naturally all those that felt they could. Some of them felt on their own that they are not able. That their blood wouldn't be any good. You know how people are generally. But many of those that felt they could, they went. All locals of the textile donated quite a few pints of blood. I mean they didn't continue doing it, but they went once, and some of them went twice.

Ken: There were other things besides giving blood during the war, weren't there - other types of war work? I mean outside of working what other things did people in the local do to help the war effort?

Kar: We did everything we could. The only thing we could was blood. What else could we do as a local?

Ken: I Mean the local - bundles for Britain and so on.

Kar: That was done individually, not as a local campaign. A lot of people went to various places, collected clothing, looked them over, and sent it on. For instance, in our group we had four nationalities together, the Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, and Russians. So the four of these groups worked together. They were knitting socks for the soldiers, shawls, woolen shawls you know, scarfs for men, warm scarfs. And medicine. We raised money.

By the way we did raise in the local. We had a box and anybody that could would drop in a few pennies so we could buy some medical aid and send it out to the various places.

Ken: What was our group.

Kar: The textile group. The other group I mentioned was the nationality women got together away from the union. It had nothing to do with the union.

Ken: What about buying bonds?

Kar: Bonds. I'm glad you mentioned that. Yes. We urged the people it's a good thing to put money in the bank if you can, but it would be still better if you bought the bonds. You will never lose on them and it would help the war effort. That was a campaign throughout all the locals to buy bonds. Of course with the low wages they were making because textile was still way below other union workers, so they couldn't buy very many. But I think that quite a few were sold. However those that were buying were able to say if they bought bonds. So that was about all the war work we could do in the union, the bonds and the blood.

And then outside of that we also worked as women.

Ken: I am trying to conceive of how you could have had a husband and a child, and run a union, and run a Joint Board, given eighteen pints of blood and done knitting.

Kar: I didn't do much knitting [laughter]. I had a needle and I had the wool, but I couldn't do that. I went there to speak with them and encourage them. That was my main task. I didn't do the knitting.

Some of the women did. They did a tremendous job. They knitted hundreds of pairs of socks. They went to the movies and they knitted while they were sitting there. And they really worked hard to try to help the war effort. It was for a very good cause, and they did it. It took my time, that's true.

Ken: What was this committee called Soldiers and War Relief that you functioned on. It was in the CIO Council I believe.

Kar: I know that there was something started. I think it was because I gave them a report on what the women I was in contact with were doing, getting the clothes together and sending them to the Red Cross, and other organizations. They used to pick them up and send them out. So I made several reports like that at the Council under good and welfare on the war effort.

Ken: Now I understand you were the only woman on the Labor War Aid Committee to help the Red Cross.

Kar: Well, that was also bringing back reports to the council and bringing reports to the locals what we could do to help.

Ken: What was the committee itself. Was it a separate committee.

Kar: It was a separate committee organized, but it didn't function too well. The women like myself and the other women there, they were already doing it through other groups, through unions and so on, and I think that petered out very quickly. It didn't last six months.

Ken: Is there anything more you can tell me about what you did during the war?

Kar: I don't remember what else I did except write. I wrote quite a few articles. I wrote also for the Herald [Labor Herald] on the war effort. And I don't remember what else especially. We were always on our toes though to see what we could do.

Ken: You sure as hell were [laughter]. Let's come to the end of the war then. In 1944 the Dies Committee was functioning in Washington. Did they get after you in any way? - after that small deal in San Francisco. That was the little Dies Committee here, but this was the Martin Dies Committee.

Kar: I think my name was mentioned somewhere, but I wasn't called. They came to San Francisco. Martin Dies himself came, and they had these movie men and some of the others. Well, I wasn't called.

Ken: I see. Well, what connection did you have with the Bridges [Harry] defense work?

Kar: I had connections through a committee in the Council. They had a committee on the Bridges defense. So I went before our local and I asked for help; how much we can donate. We couldn't donate much, Our local was poor. Very little money remained from dues. We had to send them to the International. So what we did, we passed an assessment on the members, it was twenty five cents or fifty (I have forgotten what it was now) for the members to pay. It lasted about four months. And then we get a letter from the International, "stop it."

Ken: No. kidding. During the war?

Kar: Yes, when Bridges was arrested. "Stop it" because we are not helping communists. So we had to stop it.

Ken: I'll be darned. Did you function in any other way than through the local on the Bridges Defense Committee.

Kar: Not through the local. Through the Council, the defense committee of the council. So I brought it before them, and they said, well "instead of angering the international, cut it off."

Ken: What else did the local do then.

Kar: The local couldn't do much else except to march. We had a demonstration. We asked the local members to appear, as many as possible. It was in front of the City hall, some carrying banners. Not just my local, the labor movement here in San Francisco.

Ken: How did your local feel about the Bridges case?

Kar: At the time we passed the assessment some of them were skeptical, the men. The women didn't say very much, but some of the men got up and very hotly debated the question - "He's supposed to be a communist and we are all going to be called communists, and we had better not do that." However, the majority passed. I think it was for four months that we collected from every member twenty five cents, and then we had to stop it.

Ken: Your local would be considered a militant local wouldn't it, in the ~~sense~~^{sense} of being progressive and doing things that maybe a lot of other locals didn't do.

Kar: I wouldn't say - it was quite progressive, yes, but it wasn't too much, I've lost the word here.

Ken: Well, how would you say being a minority like being Portuguese or Mexican, or Black, affected the progressivism of people?

Kar: They were quite progressive. I think that they were more progressive than some of the groups that I had organized previously before here in California. I think they were quite progressive, yes. And they understood the labor movement much better. They understood that being alone in the labor movement will not give them what they want, better conditions, better wages, and so on. But they have to be connected and help out also politically. Many of them thought so. When it came to election time they campaigned. Some of them went to the election boards and offered to help the group. And it wasn't pressured by the local. Many of the local members did even though many of them didn't speak well english. However they thought that they should vote

Kar: and should ask other people to vote; that the people should become citizens of the country.

At one time we had quite a campaign. We issued even a leaflet that all those who can become citizens should become citizens, telling them where to go and register, and so on. We had a committee for that.

[noise of airplane - so stopped for few minutes]

Ken: I wonder why I didn't ask you this question earlier. There was a question about aliens. There was a CIO Council- I just remember this a little. There was a discussion about the use of aliens; that they weren't using aliens of Italian extraction or other aliens in war plants. Was there discrimination against aliens in war plants?

Kar: I heard that too in the Council meeting. Some of the employers in the steel industry and some of the bigger employers, they didn't want to use the aliens, but that wasn't so in the textile.

Ken: There was a campaign to get Wallace as Secretary of Commerce, and the only reason I'm asking you this is that your vice president was out here, a guy named Janice ? was out here to get political action committees in all the textile unions to get Henry Wallade as Secretary of Commerce. He was here in 1945 to try to talk the Textile workers into supporting him.

Kar: We had only one meeting with him in our local in San Francisco. He spoke, and that was it. We didn't follow through. We didn't take any action.

Ken: Why?

Kar: Because I thought it would be futile to try to tell the people what it all meant. The President they would understand. So we let it go.

Ken: What did the local do, or rather what did you do about working for rent controls and price controls?

Kar: For rent controls - during that period here in Oakland we had quite a few people that were put out of their homes. So we had committees that went to stop the Sheriff from throwing them out of their homes. And some of our local people went there too. There was quite a lot of confrontation with the police in that period. They didn't want to permit them to throw them out. Other locals too. The ILWU came out, and a lot of other unions. I think it was during that period if I am not mistaken.

Ken: You mean for non payment of rent?

Kar: For non payment of rent. Some of them, they couldn't pay. They were being put out on the street, and there was a lot of confrontation here.

Ken: Was that a union thing?

Kar: It wasn't a union thing. It was a special committee. It seems like an ad hoc committee ^{ab} got organized and it was from unions and local people plus those that supported it. And there was quite a bit of that and I know some of our union people went there and worked with the others to stop them from putting the people out.

Ken: Were there any arrests?

Kar: There were some arrests but our union people didn't get arrested. I know I went to a couple of them to make up the public. The men of course did all the carrying back of the furniture and stopped the Sherriff from going in. But the women just stood in a circle around. There was quite a lot of that here.

It was effective to the extent that the type of welfare that took hold and paid rent for some of these people so that they wouldn't be moved out, especially widows with children. Of course in those days they weren't getting welfare, and they couldn't pay, and they were being thrown out. So that ad hoc committee organized to help them.

Ken: Let's see - what about price controls?

Kar: Price controls. I spoke before when they had these price controls that it somehow didn't affect us too much, one way or the other. So we didn't have any special committees or anything.

Ken: How about the 1944 election campaign. Were you involved in that for Roosevelt?

Kar: For Roosevelt, yes. We were involved very much in the union. We had all kinds of leaflets from the council, from other sources, from our international to be distributed, and we all worked together to get him re-elected.

Ken: I was wondering - how did you feel about Truman vs. Wallace as a vice-presidential candidate?

Kar: It wasn't that important here anyway. I don't remember what - it wasn't a big issue. The issue was to get Roosevelt re-elected.

We worked very hard on that. I remember a few days before the election that our union people all agreed (I don't know how far they went) to cover their neighborhoods with leaflets. There were stacks of leaflets brought into the hall and they were going to distribute them. I don't know. There were thousands of them, in my local alone, and the whole city was covered with them. Not so much in San Francisco.

Ken: How do you feel about unions getting involved in politics generally?

Kar: On some questions they should. I believe on various questions that come up unions should get involved because it is not all economics. You can win economically. You can lose politically and you can lose everything. And I believe that they should get involved. Not to the extent where they are going to elect or put out candidates or anything of that sort, but once they are put out they should know who they are voting for. They should know why, and I think they should get involved that far.

Ken: What about initiating legislation?

Kar: Yes. Definitely. Legislation that would help labor. I mean there are so many things that usually come up that would really benefit labor. We know only after it is on the ballot or taken off the ballot. It should be known to all labor, and labor should support.

Ken: They tried to pass the ~~E~~qual Rights Amendment during the war, and all the unions were against it, or a lot of unions were against it. Did that come up at all?

Kar: It didn't come up in my organization. I knew about it, but it didn't come up in my union.

Ken: What did you think about it at the time?

Kar: I was for it, just as I am now.

Ken: You are for the Equal Rights Amendment? Some union women aren't on the baais that -

Kar: I know they aren't for one reason. That some of these measures that we have already gotten to help women like not lifing so many pounds, more rest periods and so on. Naturally if this amendment goes through we are going to lose that because that will be on equal rights with men. But, on the other hand, it is up to the unions to see that it is transferred to both because all these things can be applied to both men and women. So that's why I feel that it should come even if the next year they lose. That would give us a strong fight for the future. The improvements are for both men and women. The fight for those improvements. I feel that should be the way it could be worked. They need three states now to have it go through.

Ken: California has already passed it.

Kar: Yes.

Ken: I'll ask you one more question. How did the end of the war affect your union?

Kar: It didn't affect us at all. The people remained where they were at work. Our factories didn't go into a recession. I think the reason they didn't go - a lot of the bag factories claimed they shipped the bags for sand bags - but later they needed more for agriculture and so on, and they just continued working. Of course it didn't affect the cotton mill. ~~It wasn't doing war~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~ work anyway. And it didn't affect any of the curtains or any of the other factories. It didn't affect us at all.

Ken: The next question is going to be on the United Nations, and I want you to think about it a little bit. I know you were involved, and I don't know how, and if you could sort of generate the questions and answers yourself I would appreciate that.

Kar: Yes. I'll be glad to say what my part was.

end of tape

OK
12/16/77
SKB

Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview with: Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Thursday, October 13, 1977, at home
of Mrs. Kaross -San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin, tape #11 - page #230 - Counter #1

Ken: At the end of the laat tape we decided to go
along to the United Nationsle Conference and
I know you were involved in that, but I don't
know how. And I couldn't find any information.
So can't you just tell me what you remember
about it?

Kar: I was assigned as a reporter by a Lithuanian
paper, and also by the CIO Council of San
Francisco. I went there as a reporter and got
all my credentials as a reporter.

Ken: What did you do at the Conference?

Kar: Well, I sat there with the reporters - to ibterview
officials and get various reports as to exactly
what went on and what will go on at the Conference.
And I had a very interesting time because I met
all these important people that came from the
various countries to participate in the Conference.

We had special days on which we met certain
delegations. We met delegations from India. We met
delegations from U.S.S.R. and various other delegations.
And then several times we had press meetings where
we discussed what was important for us to put out
to the people and what was important for us to
ask as literature that they were distributing. So
we had a very interesting time.

Ken: Who had the press meetings?

Kar: The press. All the press got together.

Ken: Did the CIO or the Lithuanian paper every ask -
did they ever tell you what to ask?

Kar: No.

Kar: I wrote whatever I thought was important. And I made verbal reports to the CIO Council. We had weekly meetings, and at those meetings they asked about the United Nations, and I had to make a report.

Ken: Were you every able to interview anybody personally?

Kar: Personally, I did not. We interviewed by whole groups of various people. I know we interviewed English, wha'ts his name, Anthony?* I forget his last name now. We interviewed him. We interviewed Gromyko**. And we interviewed especially Soviet because everybody was very interested those days in what the Soviet Union is going to do. So we had at least half a dozen interviews with various delegates from there.

Ken: How were you treated by the other reporters?

Kar: Very well. There were several women reporters besides myself. Not very many, but there were some. They treated me very well. I had telephone calls to come because they had made some arrangements to meet with somebody. So I was not left out anywhere.

And I gave a report to the Lithuanian press. It went in the paper for about three weeks. It was not one column, but about five columns each time because I typed off everything that went on.

Ken: Tell me this. Did you have any trouble switching from Lithuanian to English and back again when you were writing a column.

Kar: No. None at all. In fact maybe I'm even better [in Lithuanian] than I am in English because I didn't have very much education you know. I had no trouble.

Ken: Did you belong to the Newspaper Guild too?

Kar: No I didn't. It wasn't that type of reporter. I mean I wasn't making my living from reporting so there was no need for me to join.

Ken: You weren't questioned by people?

Kar: No. They knew I was representing the language press, and they knew I was also from the CIO Council.

Kar: They had a Build reporter also from the CIO Council. He made a report and I made a report. If I started first, they added, and we were working that way.

Ken: What relationship did you have with the women reporters?

Kar: I had none outside of meeting with them in a group. I had no time for that. In fact, I used to run into these meetings and run out because I was still working in the union and I only took time off during the day, as much as I could or whenever they had a reporters' meeting,

Ken: Did you get to go to any of the social affairs.

Kar: I went to one. They had a dinner at the St. Francis Hotel. I belonged at that time to this American Russian Institute. So we also had a meeting with all the Soviet delegation at the St. Francis Yacht Club. So I was one of the organizers helping to organize that meeting.

Ken: What came out of it.

Kar: It was just that we had a good group of people interested to know what the Soviets are doing. And I think we had a very, very good meeting - a meeting that was really for an understanding between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

Ken: OK. I guess that takes care of the United Nations. Where were you when the atom bomb was dropped?

Kar: I heard it on the radio.

Ken: What was your immediate reaction?

Kar: It's hard to say what the reaction was. I think that my husband and I, we both cried thinking what now - that the world might go up in flames, if this is going to continue. Because I was already in sort of a peace movement, starting a peace movement around the bay area ~~xxxxx~~ here, and I wrote for some of the papers here on Nazism and what we should do eliminate it from the world and so on. And hearing that I thought well if we've got it it will only be a matter of months or a few years the rest of the

Kar: world will have it. And it was scary, the most scary thing that ever happened in my life, I think.

Ken: There was a good deal of debate when it happened.

Some people thought it was right and some other -
Kar: I never did think it was right that so many ^{innocent} lives were laid down. If it's war, it's war, with soldiers. They know what they are doing. They know why they are fighting. They are there to do that. Now, when it comes to innocent people, to women and children I think It's hard.

You see in 1962 I went to Japan, ^{to a Peace conference} and I went to Hiroshima and I saw - ^{filmed} liquidated or something - shoes of children and clothing and the pictures of how the people looked. I went to various health places where they were bathing in certain health waters and so on. And I went to hospitals, several hospitals.

In fact I personally saw the little girl that was making these paper doves or paper - what do they call them?

Ken: Cranes?

Kar: Yes, making those, and she was counting them. She had to make a thousand in order to get well. And she was making them, and counting, and she died before she was able to get a thousand.

Ken: How tragic.

Kar: There were many like that. These people thought that these cranes would help them; that if they would make so many cranes, that meant peace, so much peace spread in the world. They were all making them. In fact I've got one right here. I can show it to you, one of these that I brought home with me. It was the most sad thing that I've ever seen, and it's no wonder that it shook me when we had this atomic bomb.

Ken: What group was it that you were organizing. Was it women for peace or -

Kar: I went through Women for Peace. I belonged to Women's

Kar: International League for Peace and Freedom ever since its inception a long time ago. And I went with the knowledge of that organization plus the Women for Peace in Berkeley.

Ken: The group that you were starting then, after the war, was Women for Peace?

Kar: Yes. Women for Peace. I belonged to that. And five of us, I think, went from here to Japan.

Ken: What did you do when you came back?

Kar: I made many speeches about it. Told what I saw. I had written in the paper about it and I was asked by the Council at that time, although it was already the AFL-CIO Council, I was asked to make a report there. And I made a short report there on what happened because they knew me from before. You see I quit in sixty and I went in sixty two. It was two years after.

I wouldn't want to go and ~~xxxx~~ see that again at this age because it was so shocking.

I went to Germany, but it was later. Twice I was in Germany to Peace Congresses. I saw the old rubble that was still there. And the last time I went in seventy five the rubble was already pretty well cleaned up. They left certain parts. They left a church which is overgrown with ivy, and it had a broken wall and windows and so on. They left that, and they are going to keep it as a memorial. That was in East Germany.

Ken: Did you see any concentration camps?

Kar: Yes, yes. Belsen, I think. And of course I went to other concentration camps when I went to Lithuania. They had one right there in Kaunas Prison where they were burning the bodies. They had these ovens, and they were still standing there. And in Germany was the one that was the most shocking. We saw that, the wire around the places where they kept these people.

Ken: I don't remember this, maybe you don't either. Was it in the papers when we bombed Dresden? Did we know it?

Ken: That wasn't a military base either.

Kar: I think we did. I remember that it was brought to us that it was possibly bombed by the United States - something like that.

Ken: I don't remember how anybody felt about Dresden being bombed as opposed to Hiroshima.

O I mean it was also a -

Kar: Well, there were not that many casualties.

Ken: The whole town was decimated.

Kar: But the casualties in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were a quarter of a million. A quarter of a million people died outright. And then another - I think close to a million since then have died of these keloids, the burns that they received from the bomb. The children that were born all crippled. It's just horrid. And I hope that the world is coming to a time when they will abandon this bombing of the innocent people. I don't care what country they belong to. The people themselves are innocent, and the children and old people that they have killed with their atomic bomb.

Ken: All right. Now we come to the transition to peacetime. We discussed this a little bit - how many people, if any, lost their jobs from the textile during that period?

Kar: Not any that I know of because ours was not really a war industry though they did use some of the material like bags for sand bags or something. They were shipped to - I suppose across to the war zone. But it didn't affect us.

Ken: The women working on men's jobs, were any of them laid off to be replaced by service men returning?

Kar: There were a few yes, but very few because most of them [the men] were beyond service age that were working in the factory. So there was very little of our people that went to war. From the bag industry, many of them were not citizens. We had mostly women, but a few men worked there. Then in the other factories like the rope factory,

Kar: they were all elderly people. Very few, maybe a couple of younger people.

However we did have a discussion at that time in the Council.

Ken: That's the next question I was going to ask - good.

Kar: At the Council, there was a lot of discussion. In fact we had committees elected to get together with the other unions and to get together with the National CIO with what we can propose to the government to have these people absorbed in some other jobs; and give them some outright help. We had quite a discussion on that.

Ken: Although it wasn't true in your union you were aware of the fact that a lot of women working on men's jobs got laid off when men came back.

Kar: Yes, in other industries. Ours wasn't so much.

Ken: Do you know what the women's reaction to this was?

Kar: They took it for granted. They understood. That's the way I felt at that time. Some of them asked questions and we had to tell them that it was a promise made that when a man comes back he gets his job back. There was no hard reaction on it.

Ken: What about women that stayed on the job?

Kar: Most of them did [in textile].

Ken: I heard this, for instance - It hasn't anything to do with this - but that Ruby Heide was the Secretary of the Central Labor Council and when one of the guys came back she said, "No, I'm staying." Is this true.

Kar: I heard that too. But I don't know personally.

Ken: So what program did you have on this jobs for women locally? I mean the CIO. Did they have a program?

Kar: They had a program that when women were laid off, to see whether we could place them in some other industry. We were asked in our industry if we could place more women as they were being laid off in some of the industries. Since we had what we called a hiring hall, we took them on. And if the employer called for a worker we sent them out if we didn't have enough of

Kar: ours.

Ken: How did they feel, working at a much lower wage.

Kar: They had to take it. When we sent them to a job, we told them. We told them, this is textile and that's it. You want to take it permanently or temporarily, that's your choice. And some of them took it on a permanent basis. I mean most of them did thinking when they call back in their own industry they would go back there.

Ken: There was another theory that most women didn't want to work when the war ended; that they felt it was a temporary thing and they were anxious to get back home and not work. What do you think of this?

Kar: I didn't come across anything like that. A few left possibly, but most of them stayed on.

Ken: The other factories I was thinking of.

Kar: I know that some of the unions had some little trouble because all of a sudden they [the women] just quit, and they had to replace them in a hurry. So some of the other locals even called us to see if we had any women to send to a job. But I don't think it was a very big thing here in San Francisco. It was on a small scale.

Ken: It wasn't a pattern then?

Kar: No.

Ken: What difference did the close of the war make in negotiating contracts?

Kar: No different. Not that I know of.

Ken: Well, how did you fight against proposed wage cuts?

Kar: There were no wage cuts in our industry.

Ken: They were proposed.

Kar: Naturally if they had occurred we would have fought. But that did not occur in our industry except that after that year we did not get a raise. We were not able to negotiate a raise. We negotiated, at that time, some other important parts of the contract like longer vacations and an extra holiday or something

Kar: of that kind. But we were not able to negotiate wage raises. And they all took it for granted that the war is over, everything is dropping, and that was it.

Ken: What do you think the no strike pledge (although it didn't affect your local) have on labor in the post war years? Did the fact that a lot of people

Kax: didn't strike affect their so-called labor militancy?

Kar: Yes. It hurt that. There is no question about that. We were very much afraid in discussing this question in various committees that the people would give up fighting for the union; that unions are going to lose membership, and it would be hard to organize them. Which was a fact. The AF of L lost a lot of members during that period, a lot of union members. Whether they lost the locals or they lost them individually I can't tell you right now. But I know they lost a lot of members, thousands of them in the whole union movement.

Ken: This is just off the top of my head. I wonder if the big brotherism of the Roosevelt administration had something to do with it to. You know, big brother is going to take care of you.

Kar: No. I don't think so. I really don't. You know the people in the unions are not interested in politics. They live from day to day. They don't go beyond that in thinking what's going to happen three years from now or further. They just live from day to day. If they saw that they can get an increase, that somebody else got it, they got up and they hollered for an increase, and you had a heck of a time telling them why you can't get it. And if they took a loss or a cut, they stood pat, "Not us.", and that's as far as they went. That's my understanding.

Ken: Well, in 1956 the CIO waged a big push on the wage-hour fight. What part did you play in that?

Kar: We just went along because it was hard to stir up my union in that work.

Ken: What about the Office of Price Administration?

Kar: I didn't participate very much in that either. At that time we had negotiations going on and I sort of stayed away from that.

Ken: Let's see. There was another campaign you were probably interested in. The Fair Employment Practices Commission - they were trying to get that on the ballot in California.

Kar: Yes. I remember that. We had leaflets. We distributed them among the people asking them to vote, showing them how to vote. And we had a campaign on that, but I wasn't involved in it.

Ken: I thought perhaps you might have been because of the large number of minority people in your union.

Kar: No. We took part by distributing leaflets and by explaining what it was all about. Personally I was not involved in any committee work. That's what I mean.

Ken: I want to stop here. [tape turned off]
We were just reading something from the Labor Herald about the Shriners Convention in 1946. What was this about Bemis Bag and the Shriners?

Kar: They would not sign a contract. They would just agree to sign a statement but didn't want to sign a contract. This was a national policy because Bemis bag was a national organization. And at that time we were very, very sore at them because the other companies came back at us saying, "Bemis doesn't have to sign, why do we sign?" So here we were bput in a very bad position because they refused to sign a contract.

At that time the Convenion [Shriners] was on and Mr. Bailey was one of the officers there, the officials, and decked out in that fancy suit and all. So we decided we were going to demonstrate at that convention to show that we as not so noble. So we were able to do that. And it hit the spot because everybody paid attention to that. It was in

Kar: the papers, and a few months after that Bemis signed the contract.

Ken: What kind of a picket line did you have, and where was it?

Kar: It was in front of the Shriners Temple where they had their meeting.

Ken: And who was on the picket line.

Kar: The textile workers from other factories. We didn't ask the Bemis people to do it because we felt they might be hurt afterwards. Other bag factory workers picketed.

Ken: What other signs did you have except "One Noble Not So Noble".

Kar: We said, Bemis is Unfair to Workers. I can't remember the exact wording, but we had quite a few signs.

One of these signs was snatched by one of the Shriners, and broken. But they left the others alone.

End of tape - first side

Tape Counter #1

Ken: Was there a strike around that time, or was it afterwards?

Kar: There was a strike around that time, but we didn't want them to go there with their signs. They were picketing the factory. Although I am thinking now that a couple of them did go in spite of that. I know that they were there. Nothing happened. After the strike everything was smooth and nobody brought it up.

Ken: What happened with the strike?

Kar: We won in all the factories, and we won in that one too. I don't remember all -

Ken: It was a bag strike?

Kar: Right. It was a bag strike.

Ken: I see. I thought all the plants had signed but Bemis.

Kar: All the plants had but Bemis. They didn't exactly sign. They were waiting to see what Bemis would do. They agreed to sign. So the others were still out at the time they had the convention. They were

Kar: all out yet.

Ken: Who thought of the idea of this picket line in front of the Shriners?

Kar: It was mine.

Ken: I knew if I didn't ask you wouldn't tell me.

Kar: And I made that sign up too. And afterwards when we got together with Bemis, they asked who did that. I told them it was myself because I thought you were very much unfair. They all signed and I don't see why you couldn't sign. So he got his company to sign.

Ken: How did you and Bailey get along after that?

Kar: We got along very nicely. Bailey was a very nice man.

Ken: How did Taft Hartley and the Wagner Act affect your negotiations?

Kar: Not too much! We did call upon them to send a arbitrator several times. But I mean we didn't have any trouble because of that.

Ken: Wasn't the Taft Hartley the time when you had a fine to pay if you didn't attend a meeting, and it was illegal after that?

Ken: Was the union attendance good after the war?

Kar: No. Not as much because we had fines for non-attendance of meetings. And after the Taft Hartley Law went in, for a while we still had attendance. We didn't tell them because we needed the money. That money went directly to the treasury of the local. The other money we had to split up with the International. Also we paid the Council and the local Councils, so we didn't have hardly any money left from that. And all the money for the locals went in from fines for non attendance of meetings. It was a small fine. However it amounted to some money. So during that period we didn't say for a while; but about six months later, I think, it came out. They had to raise it in a meeting. Somebody told that we don't have to go and we don't have to pay fines. And when that came out of course

Kar: we had to tell them the truth, well you don't have to but you should.

We had pretty good meetings even then.

Ken: What did you do after they didn't have to pay the fine to encourage them to come to meetings?

Kar: We encouraged them, and they kept coming. There was a small attendance, but not very bad.

Ken: Did you change your tactics in any way?

Kar: No. We still had the same meetings; the same types of meetings. And they attended pretty good. I do want to say this for the textile group. It was much better than some of them that used to make reports to the council that the attendance dropped to a dozen or so. Ours, in the biggest local we had something like five hundred or thereabouts, and we always had an attendance of about four, and it dropped to maybe three [hundred]. So this was much better than some of the other unions, much better.

Ken: I don't remember ever asking you this. Which was the local you belonged to?

Kar: One Four Six, Oakland.

Ken: That was the cotton, the one you organized?

Kar: Right, and we had other shops too. We had National Automotive Fibres in that local, and we had a couple of small sewing shops.

Ken: That's the one you voted in? Now, did you tell me about the Sunset Line and Twine in Petaluma going into Local 6 [I.L.W.U.]?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: That was the group that went in.

Kar: That was from San Francisco Local 158. I organized that. It was not in Petaluma at first. It was located somewhere else. I started organization, and when they got in Petaluma I organized them. Then serviced them once a month by going to Petaluma.

Ken: Oh, yes. You told me that.

What did the International have to say about them going into Local 6?

Kar: They didn't say anything. It was too small a group for them to worry about. It was about thirty or thirty five people. It was a small group and they didn't worry about it.

It was just as well because they had service there and an office there in Petaluma of the I.L.W.U., and they could always service them. I had a hard time to ~~get~~^{get} from San Francisco there for servicing. Once a month wasn't enough so I was glad, in a way, that that they took them, and I think it was no more than right.

Ken: In 1946 you were elected to the CIO Executive Council and were one of thirty three on the executive board. Now, why did you want to continue on the Board?

Kar: I don't understand the question.

Ken: You ran again for the State Executive Council. How did you feel about continuing on the Board?

Kar: I thought I could contribute to the Board with my experience, such as I had.

Ken: Was the nature of your activities different because of the problems of the post war period?

Kar: Not much.

Ken: Well, in what ways?

Kar: There was a little difference in organizing. It was harder. There was difference in negotiating those days. So there ~~were~~ some slight hardships in servicing the workers, and ^{I thought} maybe I could contribute something towards that.

Ken: What about the jobless during that period?

Kar: As I said, in our local there wasn't too much joblessness. Personally I had no trouble in that area because we had very little joblessness. We didn't have a special person. However, they had to call the union if they wanted to hire people, though there were not many unemployed that I had to deal with. Maybe half a dozen. At times maybe ten, something like that of those not working and wanted a job. But very few.

Ken: Let's get on to the Santa Cruz CIO Convention When the Progressive Party was formed. Did you go to that convention?

Kar: No. I didn't go to that convention. However, we had quite a campaign for him [Henry Wallace].

Ken: What did you think of the third party?

Kar: Well at the time it sounded right. We thought it was right because the two parties showed themselves, after the war, to be very poor in servicing the people and we felt the new party was just something that would probably liven up interest of the people. However, our International was not for it. And I had a letter saying "Stay out of it."

Ken: Did you?

Kar: No.

Ken: Did your local take part in it?

Kar: The locals weren't taking much part anyway. We had the leaflets that were put out by the committee and other groups and we distributed those.

Ken: I mean some locals had political action committees.

Kar: Our Local didn't take any active part. Not one of the locals. Only I was taking part, and they forewarned me that I shouldn't.

Ken: Did you not have political action committees in the locals because the international didn't approve?

Kar: The locals didn't want it. I couldn't induce them to take an active part in that. So I did it on my own. They didn't object. When leaflets were brought in I could put it out to them. Give them leaflets and whatever I wanted to do, but there was no activity in the local itself. They were not directly involved.

Ken: Did you think he had a chance to win?

Kar: No. I don't think I thought that personally. I thought that it would create an era for a time where the people are going to begin to think that the old

Kar: parties are not good any more. Neither party keeps their promises as we all know to date. So I thought that the people will find that out. It's going to be to the good even if we don't win, which I didn't think we would. Personally I didn't.

Ken: I think we'll break ~~it~~ down and get your daily life. Some of the women who do interviewing of women like to get in a day in the personal life of somebody during a period - how you lived and what you did, and before the general questions at the end of the interview I would like to get sort of a picture of your personal life. Let's say, when you were organizing the cotton mills - where did you live?

Kar: We lived that time on one hundred and third avenue in Oakland.

Ken: Was it your own home?

Kar: Yes it was, the first home we bought here. It was just a small home, very small.

Ken: How did you get enough money to make a down payment?

Kar: You know how much it was? The whole home was twenty seven hundred. My husband was working. I was working here and there. At that time I worked in the hospital. I worked in a hotel as a dishwasher. I did about everything. I went to the farms, you know.

Ken: Was this the time your daughter was in the hospital.

Kar: No. My daughter was in the hospital when we first came. That was in nineteen thirty. In thirty one she came back from the hospital. -So I wasn't doing very much at that time.

Ken: What kind of a house was it?

Kar: It had five rooms. Just like this only the house was smaller. Very small. Five rooms. And we had a bedroom for our daughter, and a bedroom for our selves, and a kitchen, and a small dinette.

Ken: What was the neighborhood like?

Kar: It was a very nice neighborhood. There weren't many homes at that time in the neighborhood. One home on the other side of the street was the only

Kar: house. And there was this red train coming through at that time from San Francisco, and it went almost by the house there. So I had good transportation.

Ken: Did you know your neighbors?

Kar: No. I didn't have many. Across the street there were a few more houses but on our side there were no houses on that block anyway.

Ken: Who cooked breakfast in the morning?

Kar: I did. I got up early and cooked. My daughter was going to school. In the evenings, when I started working in the union, I didn't come back a lot of evenings because I had my meetings, and I stayed on. So my husband and my daughter made their own. I usually left something for them.

Ken: Who did the shopping?

Kar: I did the shopping. I always did it a day ahead, two days ahead.

Ken: Who got the daughter off to school?

Kar: She went herself. When we lived on One Hundred and Third Avenue she was already going to high school. She went to high school at Ninetieth and Mad^AArthur.

Ken: When you were organizing the cotton mills she was going to high school? I get mixed up. You left New England so early.

Kar: She was already six years old when we came.

Ken: What did she think of your organizing?

Kar: I explained to her. She was very much for it. I will show you a book she has kept from her school on her activities.

Ken: What time did you leave to go to the factory? To the picket line?

Kar: At nine o'clock in the morning.

Ken: What happened then?

Kar: When the cotton mill was on strike I stayed with the pickets. I saw that they were organized properly. We had a soup kitchen where I had to go in and see that they had enough for that day's supplies.

At that time there were a lot of these small

Kar: little shops where they had shopped for years. These people lived around there. They used to go and ask them for bones, and ask them for products that were already spoiled. They took the good parts and they made soup for the strikers. I had to stay there with them around that time.

Sometimes the police would come if our pickets would do something like overturn a car of strikebreakers or do something of that sort. So I had to stay until six o'clock. Then they had an evening picket for a while. But we did away with that later. There was no need.

Ken: What experience did you have with the police at that time?

Kar: They were trying to get me on something or other because several times they chased me, and I went into somebody's home. All the strikers lived around Twenty Third Avenue, and all around there. So any house that I would run to would be a textile workers house.

Reporters would come around, and they would see me running and they would make a big thing out of it in the papers. Naturally the police didn't like that, especially when they were overturning the cars. It wasn't my doing. For that I give credit to the strikers. I never told them to overturn a car. But they did.

At times when the cops would be chasing me I would run into somebody's house. And of course before they had a chance to rap on the door (they had no right because they had to have a permit to enter those houses) I would walk out the back way in different clothes with a shopping bag in my hand. Because the women would dress me differently immediately as I got in the house. And I would be back on the picket line. Later on I would come and change into my own clothes. They would give me a shawl or something like that and I would

Kar: walk out carrying a bag, and they didn't pay attention. Usually the woman of the house, or whoever was there, walked out with me, and they would say "Where is the woman that ran in?" And she would say "She went out the back way." So that was the answer.

Ken: Did you spend much time with the women otherwise?

Kar: I did. I talked to them. They seemed to have very much in common with me. They liked me. And sometimes they would ask me if I had something to eat. They would bring me a special sandwich or something. I had a very nice relationship with them, with all the women there. Like friendship. I enjoyed that. Not enjoyed the strike, but I enjoyed that relationship I had with the people. And I had that all through the years afterwards.

Ken: How did you get home?

Kar: Usually in a bus. I had no car those days and travelled back and forth in the bus.

Ken: What did you talk about during dinner?

Kar: I used to tell my experiences. My daughter took it all in. My husband did.

And my husband also organized the teamsters in the place he was working. So we had something in common.

We were a very friendly family. My daughter agreed with us. My husband was also in a union. So naturally he didn't oppose. He thought it was very good that we were both able to do some organizing.

Ken: What did you do after dinner?

Kar: After dinner - I had very few nights after I started organizing other factories in San Francisco. But when I first started in Oakland I had some nights. We used to go to a show once in a while. The daughter would ask, "When are we going to a show?" They were regular movies as you know. We had no TV [television]. We used to go maybe once a

Kar: week to a show. Some nights we had some friends and we would go out to see them. Then we stayed home and either read or had something to do. My daughter had her homework. My homework would be what I am going to do the next day.

Ken: When you went to meetings, what time did you get home?

Kar: I would get home as late as eleven or twelve o'clock maybe.

Ken: Did your husband wait up for you?

Kar: No. He didn't have to. I knew how to get in. In those days there was nothing to fear. I carried a lot of money when I used to collect the dues. I couldn't bank it. I had to take it home. Sometimes I had as much as a thousand dollars with me. I was not afraid. And not one time in all those years was I ever threatened by anybody. There was no fear in those days. In fact when we moved up here in San Leandro on the hill my door was never locked. The front door or the back door was never locked. And we had no fear. Now I wouldn't dare come with two dollars.

Ken: It's hard to believe how times have changed.

Kar: It changed so badly I don't know how I could have stayed out nights in San Francisco.

Ken: Well, you still do.

Kar: I still do, but not as much. You see that they had shop meetings. Each shop had their own little meeting. And naturally you had to be with them. They were right after work. So by the time you got through it might be six thirty. By the time I got back in the office to jot down what I had to do, lock up and come home. I never came home earlier than about nine or nine thirty.

Ken: That was later than the cotton mill strike.

Kar: That was when I had to travel back from San Francisco. Not later than the cotton mill because the big meeting we had on Sundays in a hall. And the small meetings with each department on the troubles they

Kar: had them right in the factory. At the gate of in the factory. I would walk in there and the employers never kicked me out. I would walk in and call them together and tell them, "I've got trouble here." And I would get it settled right there. Or sometimes after work I would wait for them after work. I didn't barge in all the time. So that's why they didn't oppose me. The times when it was very serious I barged in. Other times I did not. I waited until after work and had it on a street corner. Or else in the hallway in the factory or somewhere.

And they had troubles in the beginning. Little things. You know people thought when they have a union it's like getting together in a family. You are not going to fight any more. You are going to settle things. You are going to talk things over. Any little thing, "Well, we've got to have a meeting." It was awfully hard to make them understand that these small things can be glossed over or left for another time when there is something more to talk about. It was a work of several years before they stopped doing that. It was just small things which meant nothing. And they wanted a meeting right now.

Ken: They were feeling their strength for the first time probably.

Kar: That's right. That's the truth.

Ken: Let's come back to the same question. I want to find out the difference between your life then and later on when the Joint Board was organized and you were the manager of the Joint Board. Where did you live then?

Kar: We still stayed there for a while and then we moved to San Leandro up on the hill.

Ken: Why did you move?

Kar: My daughter was working then. That was the time she started to work after she graduated. She went to college here and graduated. And she wanted girl

Kar: and enjoy an evening or something with her. And that was too small a place. So we got a house on the hill and she helped pay it off. It was much more than our little one. And we had a big rumpus room. And she was very happy to be there. So we moved there for her sake more than for ours. I would have been satisfied there.

Ken: How much bigger was the house?

Kar: It had about eight rooms. It was on a hillside so there was a rumpus room in the back. Then there was a level. And we had two bedrooms upstairs.

Ken: What was that neighborhood like?

Kar: Very nice. It was a better neighborhood than we lived in on One Hundred and Third Avenue.

Ken: Did you get to know your neighbors there?

Kar: Yes. I knew them to say hello, and I knew who they were. But we never got together.

Ken: Did they know that you were a radical labor union organizer?

Kar: Yes. They knew that. I never denied it.

Ken: Did it have any effect on your -

Kar: No. I don't think so. They were very courteous to us and nice. In fact several times they saw somebody coming. They told us somebody was there looking for you, and small things. We were not too familiar with each other.

Ken: During that time the F.B.I. [Federal Bureau of Investigation] was investigating people. Did they ever come around after you?

Kar: Yes. They did. They came to the factory where my husband was working. They told the boss that I was a radical. And they came to the house and wanted to know about my daughter. So I just slammed my door and said "You have no business asking me any questions." And then they came again and wanted to know how my daughter was and about her husband. I told them, "You want to know about them. Why don't you ask them?" "Why should you ask me?"

Ken: This was after the war started?

Kar: Yes. "They are living by themselves. They are living away from here and I have nothing to do with them, with their political beliefs or anything, and I am answering no questions."

Then they went over to my son-in-law and wanted to know what kind of a mother-in-law you've got. Do You know what kind? He said, "Certainly I know. We know her and we love her." He told me that. Then they said, "Do you know that she is a Communist, a radical?" And he said, "Do I know? Why should I know? I know her as a loving person, and that is all." They said, "You don't know anything about her political beliefs." He said, "I've never questioned them. It's not my business. She never questioned me. Why should I question her?" And furthermore he said, "Get out of here." And he slammed the door in their face. He told me that.

They went way over to New Jersey to investigate.

Ken: New Jersey?

Kar: Yes. She lived there after she got married. They went right back there and they've been living there ever since.

Ken: Let's see now. Were you still cooking breakfast then?

Kar: Yes. I always cooked breakfast. Sometimes he made meals. If I was not home my husband would cook himself.

Right now, at the present time, I've got my stepfather who is ill, and I see that he gets his lunch. Rather it is dinner for him. It's his biggest meal. So if I go somewhere I leave it. I bring it over, and I leave it. He has a pilot light in his oven which keeps it warm for him. But I always have to watch that he has something. My husband, if sometimes I don't have enough left, he makes something for himself. I don't worry about him.

Ken: When you were in the Joint Board then, how did you get over to San Francisco?

Kar: By that time I had an automobile. My husgand had one, and I had one. He couldn't get to work unless he had one, and it was very hard for me bedause most of the shops were scattered throughout San Francisco and I had to service them.

End of tape

Interview with Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Thursday, October 13, 1977, at home of
Mrs. Kaross - San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin Tape #12 [page 263 - counter #1

Ken: What did you during the day when you were in the
Joint Board?

Kar: Usually I was called in for some trouble in the
shops. I would have to go out. I went out collecting
dues because we didn't have a check-off in those
days like some unions. In each department we had a
shop steward and the shop steward took care of
trouble in the department or let me know of the
trouble so I can come out. And they collected the
dues. So during the day I had to go out and pick
up the dues that they had and give receipts back
to the people, and also take care of any trouble.
So there was always something to do.

At other times I had to prepare the contracts.
I had to speak to the employers. The contracts had
to open sixty days prior to the expiration. If we
missed that, then it goes on and you don't negotiate.
You have got to be careful not to miss the date.
So there was always something to check, something to
do. It was sometimes more than a day. I had to stay
over later to meet with a little group in a shop,
or outside if we didn't have time to call a meeting
with them in the hall. There was always something to
do even though our union wasn't that important, but
we had a lot of trouble with the employers. And
sometimes among themselves. And you had to be on
the spot there all the time.

Ken: When you had Oakland to take care of did you just
stay over here then?

Kar: There were certain days. They knew the days. But

Kar: if it was necessary and something happened, trouble or sometnig, I had to drop things over there [San Francisco] and come over. If they had something serious over there and I was here, we had a girl in the office, and if she saw that it was important she would call me at the factory. She knew where I would be. They would page me, and I would go to the telephone and she would say "This is very serious and maybe you had better come over." So I would tell the people "I am going today, because they called me."

Ken: How often were you away from home in the evenings?

Kar: I was alway three or four nights a week. Never less. There were always shop meetings, and we had quite a few shops. Three locals is a lot of shops, different shops. We had to have those meetings in between the big meeting, with the shops separate. And then the extra meetings. So at least three or four sometimes. Saturdays too. And the cotton mill met on Sundays.

Ken: Did your husband ever have to be out nights the same nights you were out?

Kar: Occasionally. Very little. She stayed alone. Those days nobody was afraid. She [the daughter] was old enough to stay by herself.

Ken: And nobody in the family ever resented what you were doing?

Kar: No. Even my mother. My mother was here and she was ill quite a lot. And I can't take care of an ill person anyway. She knew that. I get sick myself if I have to take care of an ill person. So she never rēsentēd. She used to say "You go out so much I don't see you very much." But I always managed to see her. She only passed away ten years ago. She lived quite a while. Right across the street. So I would run in and see her, cheer her up a little bit, and then say "I'm busy. I'm going. Good bye." She never resented that.

Ken: I guess that's all on your daily life. There are a few general questions here. Thede are really

Ken: general questions and I'll give you plenty of time to think about them, so don't rush your answers.

Some people say that women get very emotional, that they are very thin skinned, and men aren't so emotional and easily hurt. Therefore women can't function as well as men. Do you think this is true.

Kar: I don't agree about functioning. I am emotional. And if somebody is hurt it hurts me, and I get emotional over it. But I don't think that hurt me in my entire work. And I can't help showing it too, when I get emotional. If somebody feels hurt or if somebody feels that injustice is done I get emotional. And I try to correct it as much as I can. I try to help as much as I can, but I don't think it has hurt me. Not at all. I didn't feel it, and they never brought that up. Nobody ever threw that in my face at all.

Ken: You don't think it affected your work?

Kar: No. I don't think so. I can say categorically no. I think it didn't hurt me.

Ken: Do men handle leadership differently than women do in unions?

Kar: Well, they are more strict. I think, compared with myself, I have seen some of the chairmen - you know we had to have chairmen in each local - Some were women, and some were men, occasionally now and then. . They are more strict and scare the people. They get up very strictly to object to something. However, as far as women are concerned, they pass things more instead of jumping on a certain question. They may pass it, or they may try to pacify the group. That I felt very much, the difference between the two. Even now in my present work wherever I go it's the same thing.

There are some women that are very mannish. I have noticed that some women, when they are

Kar: chairman of the meeting, they will try to hold it over when the men will be strict - chop it off. in anger or something. I think that is by nature. But it did not affect, I think, the work of our organization.

Ken: What about relationship with the employers. Did the men tend to have different types of relationships than the women?

Kam: I don't think so. I don't see any difference. The employer know who you are and has to deal with you. In the beginning, yes. When I first started I did see that. For instance, we had an arbitrator one time. And I was asking the questions and I was answering the questions. He never looked at me, but looked at the others. You know he never looked directly at me. He would either try to throw his question at the men, or else he wouldn't even look at me when he did answer. That was in the beginning. But later on, no. It changed completely. And now when I go to the different places in my peace work or any other work I don't notice that any more. None at all.

Ken: Why do you think this change occurred?

Kar: I think they got used to it because the women came out more. They are taking part in everything now. Not only office work like they used to. Now they work in factories, they are organizers. They do everything that the men do. Somehow it became an equal society. I feel that way now.

Ken: Say you are in a situation where there is a difficult strike and you are exhausted from being on the picket line and going to meetings. Would a man handle that situation differently than a woman?

Kar: I don't think so. Handling a situation like that you have to have a way of going about it. You have to have the same answers. And I don't see that. I think it's equal. A man, as I say, might be a little more forward, a little sharper than a woman. It might be that compared to me. I don't

Kar: know about other women. Compared to me, that might be. I always try to pacify them more in a hard situation. But still you've got to solve it. You've got to go at it. So I don't see any difference, much difference anyway!

Ken: What about the theory that women give up more easily on problems than men do?

Kar: I do 't think so. I know I never gave up.

Kxxx In fact, I think I was worse. I kept going at it. Maybe more smoothly than the men would. But I just kept at it. So I don't think that is a problem of difference.

Ken: What do you think of ^{the opinion that} women in positions where they have to consider other people might do so from a different point of view than men do.

Ken: I couldn't answer that. I don't know. I don't feel that I had a different point of view. I never felt that way.

Ken: You mentioned any number of times when I asked you that you always felt you were treated equally by union men and men in the left wing, the communist movement, with whom you worked. Do you think other women were treated the same way?

Kar: I think so.

Ken: I was wondering if it was just because of your personality that you were treated equally.

Kar: I haven't seen anything different. If there is any I haven't seen it or felt it.

Ken: Would you consider yourself a Marxist?

Kar: I hope I am.

Ken: Well, how did being a Marxist help you in your work - let's say in the peace movement?

Kar: I think I have a deeper understanding than some people. I read a lot. That's the only way I can put it, is that maybe I have a deeper understanding of the world situation and I can somehow cope with it much quicker and easier. I have that feeling that I understand it quicker. And I think it

Kar: helped me that way.

Ken: What about in the trade union movement.

Kar: The Same goes for the trade union too because they are interested in trade unions. There were discussions. We had literature on that question which comes my way quite often. As I read it, as I study it, I think it helps.

Ken: Do you think you would have gotten into the trade union movement if you hadn't gone to Philadelphia and become a bookkeeper and -

Kar: Well I think it gave me an outlook that I should do something like that, possibly much quicker than I would have any other way. I think so. It gave me an outlook to help people. That's what I feel I was doing.

Ken: I guess I never asked you this. When you started to organize the cotton mills, whatever gave you the idea.

Kar: You see I came from a textile state, Massachusetts. And I was told that there were not cotton mills or anything in California, And there were very few. So when I found out that there was a cotton mill here and found out it was not organized - in fact I even wanted to go to work there if I could get a job there because I was experienced in several. So I thought, well gee, I am going to go to work there. So then somebody told me it was not organized and they were making very little. So it got into my head, why shouldn't I organize it.

And I started. I went there and began to talk to some of the people going in and out - to the women. And they told me how much they are making and how hard the work is. They had no rest periods, and all that. So when they were talking to me I got a few of them, and I was wondering how about organizing and getting a union here. Any many of them told us that twice they tried to organize -

Ken: Oh yes. We went into that.

Kar: So that was the reason that I started, and asked them to get together. And finally a union resulted.

Ken: Was there ever a time when it was difficult for you to follow decisions made by the party on certain policies?

Kar: No. I don't think so because I wasn't involved in any particular work. And working in the union was something that was more in my line, and I just kept working there.

Ken: How would you say that union leaders should be chosen?

Kar: They were chosen by the vote of the people. I had elections once a year, and I was elected.

Ken: What do you think about appointed union officials?

Kar: I don't believe that's right although at times possibly they know who is more capable. But as far as the people are concerned I think they have ~~some~~ suspicion of somebody that comes from the top. When they know they have something to say about somebody being elected, they feel differently. They feel more like their own crowd, part of their own crowd. And I know they felt that way towards me.

Ken: How do you think unions differ today from when you first started?

Kar: I couldn't say too much because I am away from it for quite a while.

Ken: Well, say the difference at the time you left in 1960. How did they differ then from the time you were first in the union movement.

Kar: I don't know. I think people in general understand unions better nowadays than they did in the beginning. A little while back I explained they brought up small things that didn't come under a union at all. They used to think the union has got to settle. These days they don't. I think the people understand the function of a union better. Everybody does. In the days when there was no unionization at all and they started it, it was entirely different. The people didn't understand. The Union was like a mother to bring

Kar: every little trouble - that you've got to settle it. These days the only trouble they will bring is the trouble right in the shop.

Ken: There is a lot of talk now that the business of unions is just job insurance, they are big business and nobody cares about it.

Kar: There's a lot of truth in that. But I mean the majority of people in the union don't think that. I mean don't discuss those questions. I know my husband comes home from a union meeting and they never bring up those things. They should ask questions, especially in some of these unions when they hear there is some kind of a wrong deal going on they should ask questions, right in the local. But people are more scared these days to ask anything. For what reason, I don't know. I have that feeling. They don't want to. If I was there I know they would ask for everything. If they wanted something, they would come right out.

Ken: What do you think of the women's liberation movement today?

Kar: Some of it all right. Some is not.

Ken: What's all right about it?

Kar: I believe that we still don't have equality. That is true. In many things, in many jobs, the women are still looked upon as that is not their job. And my feeling is that if she is willing to do it, wants to do it, and is capable of doing it, that's her job. And it shouldn't be looked on as it wouldn't be a woman's job.

And then many of the women today are going to far out. Some of the questions that they are raising, I don't believe are women's questions. They are not. They are human questions.

Ken: What questions?

Ka : On who is going to marry whom, and all that. They are bringing up questions of homosexuals in the women's movement. Well, that is a personal life.

Kar: I am not criticizing one or the other. It is not my business. But I mean it is something that should not come in an organization. It is your life and my life. You live one way and I live another. That is something else. It has nothing to do with it. They are bringing that into the organization which I don't believe in. Outside of that, as far as jobs are concerned, discrimination, is concerned, as far as women being kept away from certain jobs, well that is not right. I would fight for that too.. I believe in that. For instance this ERA now needs only three states or something. Now, I am in the middle of the road. I don't know exactly which would be better. In one way I am for it. In another way, if the men don't wake up, it's bad. Because women now have a lot of special privileges. For instance in our factory when we organized the men didn't have rest periods in the beginning, but the women got it. I don't know what they are in the unions now. But some of the unions have certain privileges for pregnant women where they can rest a little bit or something of that sort. Well, if this ERA comes in they will cut that off completely unless the men will demand similar. If they are ill they have a right to a little rest, ten or fifteen minutes extra rest, or something of that sort. Or whatever extra privileges the women have - not living heavy - we got that a long time ago in our union, right at the beginning, that they couldn't lift more than twenty five pounds. They would lose that completely. The men would lose it and the women would lose it if that went in. You see unless the men are awake too if that goes through. I think if men are awake it would be a very good thing because both of them would get something that the women have had. So that is why it's hard to say. As I say, I am in the middle, and I don't know which way to turn.

Ken: What do you think of the theory that unions should limit themselves to wages, hours and working conditions, period. In other words some people are saying that unions are getting involved in too many things besides basic things.

Kar: I am ^{not} for that. I am for the unions taking the entire life of the country into their hands because what good would it do for any union to say get higher wages or get good conditions and then the political end would say, "No, we are going to take it away from you." So they have to understand the political life of our country as well as the life of the union. I am for that, they have to be politically minded. I think that until the majority of our people, that is labor, gets politically minded we will never have good conditions and the good that the country could give the people.

Ken: Now there are also people who say the unions shouldn't be involved in pension plans.

Kar: I agree that the pension plans are bad in some unions, but on the other hand - That's why I say we should be politically minded. Why shouldn't we get it through the government? It seems to me we are the most progressive country in the world and yet we are one of the last countries that recognizes the right of an ill person to have the right to go to a hospital, to get doctor's services. Some unions got it through their unions, but very little. We don't get what we need. Now you take the Scandinavian countries, all European countries, England, in many of them they have very good sick benefits and care. We don't. So why shouldn't the unions take part in that. That is what they should do instead of asking that just their union have it. They should be politically minded - like this Humphrey Hawkins Bill that the President promised, and he still talks about it. On the radio I heard him, what was it, yesterday morning, and he said, well, he's got that in mind

Kar: but it can't come right away. Well, I don't see why not. We are putting money elsewhere. Why can't we spend it on our own people? And that I believe very strongly. And that would eliminate all that crookedness in some of the unions.

Ken: Are you satisfied with the life you have lived?

Kar: Well, yes. I've seen about everything. I've done about everything. Except that we didn't accomplish peace. But I'm for it, and working for it. And my personal life too. I have a very good husband and a nice daughter, and I am very happy with them. And I think I am satisfied.

Ken: You wouldn't do it any other way?

Kar: No. definitely not.

Ken: What would you say was the most satisfying time in your life?

Kar: I think the most satisfying thing, outside of my family, - -

Second side of tape counter #1

Kar: was when I could do something for the people, when I was organizing them and I felt that they felt good about it. They respected me for it. And the same thing when I go to a convention, a peace convention, I feel very happy that we are trying to do something. Of course we haven't accomplished it. But still we are trying. I know that I am not wasting my life. So I feel satisfied with it.

Ken: What would you say was the most frustrating period of your life, the most frustrating experience you ever had?

Kar: I mentioned the most frustrating was our entering the war, the Vietnam war. I felt that we had no business interfering there, and even since then I have a feeling, and that's what struck me, that our youth has been spoiled. That's why we have so many killings. That's why we have so many stealings by young people mostly. It isn't the

Kar: elderly so much. It is very frustrating that we weren't able to eliminate that. Now you can't go out without locking your door, without locking it very tight at night. And when anybody hollers at night you get scared. And it's really frustrating that we haven't been able to eliminate that. And I think that started from the Vietnam war. Over there they killed anybody, they came back, and somehow it was picked up here. I feel that. I might be wrong.

Ken: You might be right too. Who knows.

Kar: That's the way I feel. That's the way it happened.

Ken: Let's see now - what friendships have you maintained over the years?

Kar: Personally, I have no time to follow up because I am busy all the time. I really don't meet very often the people. Certain ones, yes. I have a few that I am still keeping in touch with from the union. I have some from the party. I have some people that I have known in my childhood, people my age. I still have a few. We meet occasionally and that's about all. I don't have time to go to any reunions or anything of that sort.

Ken: What about that man who started you working with the women's groups when you were in Philadelphia? The man who got things for you to read?

Kar: He went back to Lithuanian. He was away from the country. And he passed away.

Ken: Did you ever see him when you went back there?

Kar: No, I saw him in 1932 when I went to the first world [peace] congress. So I saw him then. And on the way back (that was the first time I went to the U.S.S.R.) and when I got there I lived with them for the six weeks that I was there.

I read about him. I wrote about him, what he had done here, in the Lithuanian papers.

Ken: The Lithuanian women's group that you belong to, are they the same ones you belonged to forty years ago?

Kar: to put the people to work. And I thought it was a very nice job and it had results. It had quite a few results.

Ken: In your locals, were there any men who went into the army? You had so few in the local I was wondering.

Kar: There weren't very many. There were some, a few people that left.

Ken: Here's a question that came up. We'll stop and let you think about it a while. During the war the Furniture workers took over an entire textile local in L.A. I think it was local 99, because they helped them negotiate a contract. There were some minutes taken at a meeting which indicated that if you had been down there this wouldn't have happened. Do you remember anything about that?*

Kar: I remember that we had a conference on that here locally in San Francisco, having somebody from Los Angeles Furniture Workers. And somebody came from Textile. And we had the local Furniture Worker and the Council person meet. We had a meeting and we discussed this situation. And they said the reason they took over is that the people wanted - came over and asked them to do it - the people from the Textile local. There was nobody to service them. So that is why it was said that if I or somebody had been there probably this would not have happened. However it was straightened out later and the Textile got their organization back.

Ken: Oh, they did?

Kar: They did.

Ken: There wasn't a business agent there at the time then, in Los Angeles?

Kar: It is still the same group and the same organization throughout the nation. Where we had enough people, we organized a group.

Ken: I guess you have answered this somewhat, what would you say is the difference of a person seventeen or eighteen today and a person who seventeen or eighteen when you were?

Kar: I think there is quite a bit of difference. I think those seventeen or eighteen today, there is hardly anybody that is not educated through high school. Or few, if any, any more. And they are a little more forward and a little more progressive than they were in those days.

Ken: What do you think of the role of women today as opposed to the role of women in unions when you were active?

Kar: I think they have a wider breadth in activity than they had in those days because there were very few of them that took part in the union work. Now women are in every union almost. Even in unions where there were predominantly men, in steel, in the warehousemen, and so on. There are women now. So I think they are taking a very much bigger part in the work in the unions. That are at the head of the unions now. Not international, that I know of, but on the scale of state, and councils and so on there are women throughout the united states now.

When I started there was just maybe a handful. It was pretty hard to think well, "Gee, I hope I make it." Because ~~of~~ I was the only woman, and I hope I can make it. It was a sort of a challenge. But I don't think it is any more.

Ken: Here's another question. Sue and I were talking the other day and she brought up this question that she thought, or she wondered if there was any difference between the way women functioned in unions if they worked in a group or worked

Ken: singly. Like on a belt line, or around a table with a bunch of women where you have a chance to talk at work. Or if you are working someplace on a job where you don't talk with other women. Does this affect your thinking in any way, or your activities?

Kar: Naturally. If you have a chance to talk you can discuss various things that wouldn't come up in a meeting. Or maybe you wouldn't meet after work. Sure, you would have and get a broader outlook. Of course it depends on what you are talking about. If you are talking about what happens at home or something. But if you talk about work, someone is tired and says why, you get a broader outlook when you work together instead of working separately. And I think when you have your union meetings probably the questions come up quicker. Well for instance if I worked and I heard "something here is terribly wrong. Don't you think this is?" Maybe it never came into my head, but she put it in my head. So when the meeting comes I am going to raise it. So it is better that way, but not many these days are able to do that, to talk. I notice when you have a belt line you can't be thinking of anything else. But wherever you can, it is much better.

Ken: I remember talking to somebody about this. If you are just discussing your family or stuff, you need somebody to give it direction. One person could give it direction, the discussion.

Kar: Naturally, one could start that.

Ken: This isn't the finish of the interview because I have a whole series of questions. It won't take more than an hour.

But I want to ask you how do you think this interview could have been improved. You know, you always try to improve what you are doing.

Kar: You mean this interview?

Ken: Yes. This type of interview, and this particular

Ken: interview.

Kar: Well, I don't know. Maybe if we talked it over and you gave me an outline of what you would like to interview further I could prepare on that particular thing. Lot of this I don't remember when, and the sequence to put them together. But if I knew what you wanted, what was interesting and important, maybe I could slide into that and have it more interesting. See, I don't know what else you would want. So I would suggest that after this you talk a little bit and put it together, what you think should be done.

There are a few questions I want to ask you too, if I should bring out or not.

Have you got that on?

Ken: I want to put it on record because I was worried at the beginning because I have an outline and I follow it. Whether I should give it to you ahead of time and have you worry about or whether I shouldn't. You see I made the arbitrary decision and didn't give it to you.

Ka : I don't mean line by line, but generally.

Ken: I mean the general outline I had.

Kar: I mean generally what you would want me to talk on the next time generally, even if you don't give me an outline, so I could put it in sequence what to talk about. You see, I am groping for the time when it happened, and it's kind of hard to give a correct answer.

Ken: Yes, I see.

End of this section of interview.

Tape not completed.

OK
12/16/77
LK13

Labor Women series
California Historical Society

Interview: Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Thursday, November 3, 1977, at home of
Mrs. Kaross, San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

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Ken: There was a textile guy named Wm. Toller who was
here in 1948 for a West Coast Conference on the
bag industry. Who called that conference?

Kar: The international.

Ken: I see. Why did they call it?

Kar: They couldn't get identical agreements between
Los Angeles and San Francisco in the bag industry,
so they thought if the International pressured
they may.

Ken: What part did you play in that meeting?

Kar: Well, our was a better agreement, naturally, and we
explained how we got them, and there was a policy
set which I can't give you in detail of what they
should do in Los Angeles in the bag industry, and
how they could negotiate similar [agreements]. And
there were a few points, minor points, in their
contract which were a little better than ours, we
included that in our next agreement. That was
most of the conference as I remember it.

Ken: Did it solve any problems?

Kar: Yes. I think it did.

Ken: Why kind of a guy was this Toller?

Kar: It's hard to remember. He was a good negotiator,
and the people liked him.

Ken: Did he function down in Los Angeles, or -

Kar: No. He did not. He left after having the meeting.

Ken: Then in 1950 there was a textile convention. Did
you go to that one?

Kar: Yes. I did.

Ken: I think we sort of mentioned that [convention] briefly before, and you said you played a part by being on a committee or something.

Kar: I was on some committee which I can't remember now. But I think it was on a committee of policy of some type. They didn't name it policy, but it was on policy of further organizing textile, mostly in the South. They were very much at that time interested in getting the South organized.

Ken: Did they ever ask you to leave California and come back and help organize?

Kar: No. They didn't.

Ken: Did they have any women orgaizers in the South?

Kar: No. They didn't that I know of at that time. Mostly men organized. Prior to the CIO there were women like Anne Burlak, and there was Ella Mae Wiggins. She was killed by some of the anti-union people. And there were other women that were organizers. But after the CIO I don't know of any. If there were I don't know about them.

Ken: I wonder why that was.

Kar: I can't tell you [laughs].

Ken: There are just a couple of odd things before we get into the CIO. In 1959 here you went to a sub committee of Congress on labor standards which met in San Francisco. How did you find out about that sub-committee meeting?

Kar: I wrote a letter when I found out that Roosevelt was coming, James Roosevelt. When I heard he was coming to find out about labor here in this area I wrote a letter. And I got a response at that time that they will put me on the list and that they will be able to see me.

So then I prepared charts and prepared what I had to say at that time, my full schedule.

Ken: And what was it you had to say?

Kar: The rest of the textile was organized. I was trying

Kar: to organize Chinatown. I went to Chinatown even at a point where I asked for a job as a worker. And I went to these various places, these little textile places. Some of them were in the basement. Some of them were in garages. And some of these places were in homes of people where there were anywhere from five to fifteen or twenty people working. And I wasn't able to get a permanent job. I did get for one day in one place, and they said I wouldn't be suitable because I couldn't do whatever they asked me to do. Although I was a ~~swore~~^{fewer}, but their machines were a little different. You have to get used to it. And they let me go because they said I can't run that machine.

What I saw there at that time, it made me even more determined that something has got to be done for the people.

There were not all Chinese women working. There were some women that were Spanish too among them working in those little shops. And there was so much dust and dirt and dark. They had little tiny lights over the machines. And the floor seemed like it was never swept, and there was dirt all over.

Some of the women even brought little babies for a couple of hours until older children picked them up from school.

I saw that, and it was horrible. That is why I was determined to do something about it.

Ken: What kind of a sub committee was it - just on working conditions? Or what was the purpose of the sub-committee?

Kar: They wanted to find out about the minimum wages and what they could do to help the women. That was my understanding.

Ken: Did anybody in the Central Labor Council or the union help you with this?

Kar: I did ask at that time one of our representatives at the Central Labor Council to help me figure

Kar: out what I should prepare. And they gave me an outline, what they thought I should prepare. And the preparation was made by myself. I had a big chart that I brought over, the wages and how they progressed in those shops, and how these shops were located.

Ken: And what came of it?

Kar: As far as I know, Roosevelt said that some of that work wasn't within his sphere, and that they were going to take it up further, and I didn't hear any more about it. Although there is in the congressional record - the whole thing is in the congressional record.

Ken: Did you take up with the Central Labor Council the matter of organizing Chinatown?

Kar: No, I didn't. I was doing it on my own. But I did bring it up to them that I was doing it and I did ask for assistance they were able to give me in putting out a chart and how to make it, and so on.

Ken: I was reading in Jenny Matyas' interview that she made about twenty years ago that they had hired a fellow to help them organize Chinatown (the ILGWUhad) and that he turned out to be a Communist and the people in Chinatown didn't trust him, and that's why she never organized Chinatown. Or that was one of the reasons she couldn't organize Chinatown.

Kar: I never heard of that.

Ken: Was there any conflict, had the ILG still tried to organize Chinatown?

Kar: Not that I know of.

Ken: I wondered if there was any conflict if the textile had gone ahead. That was all.

Kar: None whatever.

Ken: Had you ever worked in other shops during the course of your -

Kar: Yes. I worked in a shop which makes baby garments in Oakland. I got a job, and I worked there almost

Kar: a week, three or four days. And its purpose was that, that at that time we had another business agent for the joint board; that the business agent would come with leaflets while I was working -

Ken: Oh, you told me that story. He never showed up.

Kar: He never showed up and it fell through. But it was a good thing I learned how the workers were working in these little factories.

Ken: Did you work from time to time?

Kar: I did that occasionally. I went to places and glanced over what was being done while I was there asking for a job.

I worked another day, also in Oakland, in one of the shops in a district where they had produce markets. I worked there one day, too. And the same thing - I was not familiar with the type of machines they had. I told them I was experienced, and they saw that I could run probably a regular machine but not a complicated one [laughs] so I wasn't kept.

But the purpose of all this was that if I could get in maybe somehow I could draw attention of a woman where I could talk later at work. Or know the conditions, or know the conditions and make a leaflet and distribute it and try to organize them.

I did that quite a bit. When I went to Pennsylvania, as you know, it was the same thing. I went in trying to get a job so that I could get familiar with what is going on.

Ken: While we are on this - did you ever feel that you had lost touch because you didn't work - I mean with the membership?

Kar: You mean with the type of membership I had? No, I don't think so. In general, running a sewing machine and working in a factory where they have them is somewhat similar. There is no way you can lose entire touch.

Ken: I Mean there is a theory that union officials should

Ken: not be union officials for say, not more than two, or three, or five years. And they should go back and work in the industry for a year. What do you think of that theory?

Kar: I think it's a good theory. I think if they practiced that it would be very, very good. They would be in touch not only with the work. They would be in touch with the people and know what the people are doing, what they are thinking in factories, and so on. It would be very good, but I don't know of any union official that does that.

Ken: Let's see. Now we are getting to the CIO and its policies, and we are going back a little bit because I want to find out how this affected you. And I want to quote this so it will be in the record. In 1940 at the CIO Convention communists and close associates voted to pass a resolution that read in part:

".....the congress of industrial organizations condemns the dictatorship and totalitarianism of nazism, communism, and fascism as inimical to the welfare of labor, and destructive of our form of government."*

What do you remember of that?

Kar: You mean at that convention?

Ken: Yes. The national CIO Convention.

Kar: I don't remember that anybody took the floor and had a discussion on that.

Kar: I don't know who it was from the platform got up and said that it was not within our province to discuss it, and that was it as far as I remember.

Ken: Evidently they passed it. You were there, at that 1940 convention?

Kar: Yes.

Ken: But you weren't involved in this at all?

Kar: No. I was not involved. And I remember, as I said, that this one official spoke, and the others just did not get up on the floor to quote anything.

- - - I mean it was rejected by the convention.

* Not primary source. Quoted from Long View from the Left by Al Richmond.

Ken: As I remember reading, they passed that resolution.

Kar: They passed it in a different form. Not what you have been reading to me.

Ken: I see. In what form?

Kar: I can't remember now. If I had a little more time -

Ken: Well, was it a rejection of communism along with the others - nazism, and so forth?

Kar: Not nazism. No. I mean they just rejected the communism and said it wasn't within their means to do anything about it; that they didn't want to handle it; they didn't want anything to do with that. That was the gist of the talk of the convention delegates.

Ken: You mean they didn't want to have anything to do with communism?

Kar: No.

Ken: I see.

Kar: I think they passed a resolution which deleted all that, as far as I know.

Ken: You described before that the international pretty much left you alone. Did this continue to be the case?

Kar: Yes. I was working more or less on my own. I negotiated on my own. I gave them reports on how far we got with negotiations. If I wanted to know anything further when the employers brought up something, I wrote to them and asked and they answered me, and I had that as an official document. But they left me alone. They never came to help me negotiate any negotiate any of my contracts until after the merger began.

Ken: Then, in 1946, there was another CIO Convention, and with the approval of the left and its associated and with their assistance, according to this book, they unanimously adopted a resolution that said:
"...we resent and reject efforts of the communist party or other political parties and their adherents to interfere in the affairs of the CIO. This convention serves notice that we will not tolerate such interference!"*

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Not primary source. Again quoted from Long View from the Left, by Al Richmond.

Ken: Do you remember about that?

Kar: Yes. I remember about that.

Ken: Were you there, at that one?

Kar: Yes. Naturally my feeling was _____.

A few of us had the same feeling. But we had no standing in that convention if we wanted to say anything against that.

Ken: But other trade union members, who were communists, I understand supported it.

Kar: Not the communists. I don't think so. Some that were considered probably communists supported it. Not the communist party.

Ken: Well. The international knew you were a communist, didn't they?

Kar: Not officially [laughs].

Ken: How did this resolution affect your relations with the international?

Kar: It didn't affect at that time. Nobody said anything to me. They just let me be.

Ken: In this period. I guess I can't let this go without asking you about the McCarthy period. How did it affect you?

Kar: The McCarthy period did not affect our union very much. As far as I was concerned I was told that I am on a list to be called before them and questioned by a McCarthy group. I was never questioned. Why, I don't know. I understand - somebody told me from the committee, and somebody told me from the CIO Council that some of us, including myself, will be questioned. Some of them were. But I was never called. What reason, I don't know.

Ken: How did you feel about the McCarthy period?

Kar: Well I felt that it was very bad for labor, bad for everybody in the country. Everybody was afraid. They were afraid to talk to people. They were afraid that there might be a communist under their bed. Somehow McCarthy spread that fear among people that you couldn't trust your own friends. It was a very bad period. Even in the

Kar: union I remember that some new workers came in to work and spoke (that was in one local) at the meeting. Immediately people hushed and began to talk among themselves that he must be a communist because he dared to get up and speak at the meeting. So that was the fear of McCarthy.

Ken: How did you handle the union meetings during that period?

Kar: We handled them as usual. I have that feeling that this was not a main union. In San Francisco it was not one of the big unions. So it was just left alone.

Ken: And you didn't have repercussions in the union about your own particular -

Kar: No. I did not.

Ken: Well, OK. Let's get on to 1955 when the AFL and the CIO had a convention and merged. What did you think of the merger?

Kar: I thought it was a good idea. At that time the organizing drives were sort of at a low, although there were some places that could have been organized. And I thought by merging, by having the new group coming in, that we might be able to do a little more of that. The union might grow as a whole. I am not speaking of my union, but unions in general, that they would grow as a whole. That was the feeling. I had that feeling that this was a period when we are going to get together and finish organizing the rest of the workers in the country. But it didn't happen that way. [laughs].

Ken: What affect did this have on your locals and on the joint board?

Kar: Because of my feeling, we brought that out, and everybody was happy about it. They thought it was a good move.

Ken: Did it affect your work within the trade union movement generally in any particular way?

Kar: No. It did not. But after that, whether it was the international, I cannot say; or whether it was

Kar: some of the local people who wanted to get in at the top, they began a campaign against me.

Ken: I want to get to that. Let's wait a minute. I want to ask you a few more questions. Then I want to get into that.

I want to ask you one thing. Did the merger change your way of working within the labor movement at all?

Kar: No. It didn't.

Ken: Why didn't it? Why would it?

Kar: ~~xxxxxxxkxxxx~~ The councils merged. And as far as the council was concerned, I think that I stayed until the elections, and I withdrew then from the council, the State council.

Ken: What part did you play in the AFL-CIO Central Labor Council?

Kar: I withdrew from it.

Ken: From the local one too? Did you attend those labor Council meetings?

Kar: I did until the elections. At the merger elections they elected the new officers. And many of them were not elected that were in the CIO Council.

Ken: I see. Did delegates from the Joint Board attend the central labor council?

Kar: Yes. They attended. I think finally they dropped.

Ken: What new relations did you establish with the AFL people?

Kar: You mean in the Council?

Ken: Well, you were meeting a whole new group of people.

Kar: I didn't meet too many after that because I withdrew from the council. Of course our union was running as usual.

Ken: You just paid your percapita to the AFL-CIO instead of just the CIO. So nothing changed much?

Kar: No. Nothing changed that way.

Ken: Now we're getting into the - I'm sorry, I shouldn't have interrupted you, we are getting back to the international. They had slapped your wrist a couple of times on minor things. Then what happened? When did you first get an inkling that the international didn't approve of you?

Kar: Because they put in a fellow by the name of Neil Griffin who was the West Coast Representative. When he came in here to check (well that was his duty) our locals and everything, naturally he checked with me. He talked to me. A very pleasant fellow. He stayed here for a couple of days more to visit all the officers privately. Naturally he asked some of them in the coming elections to run against me. Why should I have all these years of being an officer? That they could do that work. And they began putting up candidates against me. Although I had had a few in the previous years, they were not put up by anybody. These were definitely put up. And at the election they campaigned, they issued leaflets, they talked to groups of people that the change was about due; that if they wanted a stronger union they would have to elect somebody else. And they always had men to run against me, not women.

Well in all these years we had annually an election and I was always re-elected in spite of that. And the last election before I left they had a man from the international, a nice looking man, running against me. Previous to that they had Nate Warner who finally switched to the company, who worked for the company. They had him. Then they had another young fellow and it didn't work.

Ken: Didn't you mention they had a good looking man?

Kar: Naturally because it was a woman's local [laughter] that's why they had him. And even this Griffin was a good looking fellow. And he was a pleasant fellow, talkative and all that. He was the one that was campaigning. He wasn't running himself. He brought in first someone from our local. It didn't work.

Kar: Then in the few last elections they brought in people. And I did not campaign at all. All I did was to say to the people on the floor of each local, "You have now two, or three, running for my job. You know me, and I am not campaigning. You either have me or vote for the other fellow." And that was it. And I was re-elected.

Ken: Did you trounce them fully. What was the percentage of the vote?

Kar: At first it was a big percentage, and at the last it was a smaller percentage. But I had enough to get elected.

Ken: Why do you think they had this attitude?

Kar: Maybe the international backed them up knowing who I was; what my politics were. Although I never contradicted in any of their work at the top. Here locally I had no occasion to do that, but they knew that I was not going along fully with them.

Ken: What about Rieve and Pollock and even Toller, was their attitude toward you any different than it had been before?

Kar: Not that I know of. No. Not until the last. In fact Rieve, the last time he was here, was very pleasant, very talkative, and he never brought anything up that I should give up, or not run, or I was wrong, or any of that talk. And the same thing with Pollock. Toller, I didn't speak much to him because he wasn't here very often. He was here twice, I think, in the entire time. But Rieve and Pollock were here more often. They were very pleasant to me.

Ken: Why didn't you take the bull by the horns and ask them was the hell they were doing?

Kar: Oh, I didn't feel like it. I thought, well if they want somebody else, let them have him. [laughs] I wasn't that keen on keeping the job. I needed a job. I still needed one, but I wasn't going to keep it under circumstances where I would be getting nervous and feel bad about it. So I let

Kar: the people decide.

Ken: Did you ever discuss what the international was doing in the joint board, or with the people at all.

Kar: I didn't discuss it.

Ken: You know there are some time honored methods within the AFL, or within any union, about techniques of getting rid of people. I want to list some of them because I thought of some that maybe you can't remember. For instance, did they ever have petitions to remove you from office?

Kar: No. Just a leaflet that a new person should be elected, how good they are, and so on.

Ken: Did they ever send anybody in to create discord in the local?

Kar: No. They left it to the locals to say why they didn't want me. They said I was getting too tired to do the job, and that a man could do a better job, and talk like that.

Ken: Let's see. There are other techniques. What about putting you in receivership. Did they try that?

Kar: No. However, here is what they tried, and I don't remember the year now. That was the year before I left, I think. They sent in an auditor to audit all the books to see whether anything was missing from the dues, or whether it was misappropriated in any way. Our funds were running low by that time. That was another technique. They insisted that there should be another business agent; that it was getting too hard for me, although I did not complain. The locals elected a local man as a business agent. And our funds were low at that time. The work wasn't running full force, and our membership was low. So they had this fellow as a business agent with the same wages as I had. And our funds were low. And because our funds were low we were behind in paying the international a couple of months.

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Second side of tape

- Kar: The fellow from the international was not only to check the joint board. It was also to check the local books. In Local 146 I was the financial secretary too, at the time. And we couldn't get anyone to keep the books in order so I kept it up. Nobody got any money. It was just gratis work. So they checked all of the locals, and they checked the joint board. And the man was here about three or four weeks, checking, asking questions of the office girl. They weren't able to find anything. All they found in local 146 - the books were right - but I made a faulty page. Sometimes you make a mistake. So he wrote that the books were not neat. [laughter]. If they had found anything in the joint board or any of the locals, I felt they probably would have taken us in receivership.
- Ken: I see. They might have if they found anything wrong. That would have given them an opening. How did the joint board hold together during all this period?
- Kar: They were holding together. They had their own meetings. The board delegates came and they held meetings as usual. There was nothing raised.
- Ken: You still had just the three locals?
- Kar: The four locals. By that time we had another local, a carpet local.
- Ken: Then they didn't try to break up the joint board?
- Kar: No. They did not. They wanted it held together because that meant more money. Naturally they didn't want to break that up.
- Ken: I was just wondering how they went about it.
- Kar: I had this feeling that it wasn't so much the international as the west coast representative coming in and telling the people that you should change business agents. Somehow he gave the impetus to try to run somebody so they can get a man for a change instead of a woman. That was the attitude I felt.

Ken: How did you feel about this after all the years of working -

Kar: I didn't feel so bad. I thought if the time has come when the people feel maybe they should have a change. That's why they got the business agent, a local fellow from the shops. He didn't work out.

Ken: How was he elected?

Kar: By all four locals voting for him.

Ken: The international suggested another business agent?

Kar: No. The west coast representative, his suggestion. Not the international. Naturally he got the approval of the international. And our locals had to vote on it because it wouldn't have been legal. We had that type of by laws.

Ken: During this time, did any of your shops go into other unions?

Kar; No except that one time in Local 146 we heard from one of our workers - we got a call at the joint board office that the local wants to go into the longshoremen's*local. So immediately I got on the ~~xxxxx~~ bus and I came down and tried to find out who it was. And finally we came down to one person handing out some applications at that local. And the teamsters had been coming talking to them, but that one person had started by giving out applications. And we finally had him before a committee and he admitted he gave out applications. And the company wanted to fire him when they found out. They claimed they didn't want trouble. They had a local. They had a contract. And they weren't going to have trouble, anybody making trouble within the shop. They fired him. And we immediately got on the job to see if he was worthy of being fired or not. And our local secretary and myself called him in. And he admitted he gave out applications and we talked to him. He admitted he would have liked to have gone in with them. However he didn't do enough harm. He didn't hand out many applications, *The teamster-warehousemen were a dual union in competitions with the I.L.W.U.

Kar: and did nothing beyond that. So we had a meeting and asked the company to reinstate him. And that ended the whole thing. That was the only time we had trouble.

Ken: This story about your getting the central labor council to help you negotiate and the international not liking it? Tell me that story.

Kar: Two or three times in my negotiations that I remember when we had nobody else, and the international was too far away, in making reports before the central labor council our policy was to ask the central labor council in San Francisco, and the same thing in Oakland, that if the local needed help in negotiations, that the central labor council send its secretary to help out. So I asked for that help. And that was, I think, with the National Automotive Fibres. I think that was the factory we were negotiating with, and we had tough negotiations. I asked them to come, and they came. Prior to that I had some small negotiations and nothing happened. But when I asked them to come to this particular shop the international got ahold of it by our representative making a report.

Ken: Why didn't you ask the west coast representative to help?

Kar: Because he was busy at the time somewhere else. I couldn't get ahold of him. I have the letters, but I don't have them now. When he came in and found out that the council was in the picture he wrote to the international, and the international send a letter to the council and to myself and to the company that the international that the international didn't like that and that they weren't going to have anybody else negotiate for them. And I got reprimanded for doing it. Of course what was very sad was that the company objected to the council coming in, and the international apologized for that.

Ken: Why did the company object?

Kar: Well, they felt that the council here in San

Kar: San Francisco was a very good one and they helped all the union to negotiate. They had very able negotiators. And I have a feeling that that was the reason that the company didn't want to have anything to do with them. So they objected very strenuously and the international sent them a letter saying that it was not their policy and I was at fault.

Then we settled the issue, and that was it as far as I know. But I was on the black list.

Ken: Did the west coast representative then help you?

Kar: Yes. He came in then. I finished myself. And we finally got a contract so that the people were able to accept it.

Ken: How did this affect your relations with the central labor council?

Kar: It didn't. They knew what it was. They understood that some of the internationals objected and ours was one of them.

Ken: Was this west coast representative the one that went to work for the company after that?

Kar: No it was another one. It was the same company that we had such trouble about the council coming in to negotiate. It was a fellow by the name of Ed Warner who was a union person. What union I don't remember. But he was brogght in by the west coast representative to work with us to help us out. And he worked, I think, less than a year. And then finally he got a job with the same company that objected to the central labor council coming in. He was their representative. He waa working for the company.

Ken: So he wasn't a member of textile.

Kar: No. He was not. He came from some other union. He came in from the top to our organization and worked with our organization, I believe, less than a year, and finally landed in the company.

Ken: How were your relations with the west coast represntative after this?

Kar: Those that understood didn't have very good feelings towards him. He was a very bright fellow that knew how to get around the people.

Ken: How did you get along with him after this?

Kar: I had no personal ^{qualms} ~~qualms~~. He came, and whenever it was necessary to talk, I talked. When it was not, I left him alone.

Ken: What was his attitude towards you?

Kar: He did not have a friendly attitude right along. So I didn't see any difference. He was the same. We would say hello, and we would talk whenever it was necessary. But he had a hard time getting me out of there.

Ken: Why did you finally leave the union, then?

Kar: Well, there were several reasons. I had an accident. I was run over and I had a broken hip and head injuries and all that. It was in an automobile going to work. And I was on crutches for a while.

Ken: In 1960?

Kar: It was in 1955. So I decided that all this was affedting me. And I was nearing my social security age and I felt I didn't want to stay any more and take all that. So I left I think towards the end of May or the beginning of June [1960].

Ken: Was this after you were elected?

Kar: I think our elections were in - I have forgotten. I was elected, and I left of my own accord.

Ken: How did the people in the locals feel about this?

Kar: I don't know. As far as I know many of them sent me cards, and I had a stack of cards. They felt very bad and they wished me well, and that was it.

Ken: There was no formal good bye - no dinner or -

Kar: No.

Ken: What did the international say?

Kar: They didn't say anything. I got no letters about it at all.

Ken: What about this west coast representative?

Kar: He said nothing. I didn't see him. I just sent my letter to the joint board that on such and such a date I am leaving.

Ken: After you sent your letter, what period of time elapsed. Did you still continue to work?

Kar: I worked for about a month.

Ken: What shape did you leave the joint board in?

Kar: Well, the joint board financially was not in too good a shape because of this extra business agent.

However as far as the local was concerned, the contracts were concerned, everything was in shape.

Ken: Did you maintain your membership in the local?

Kam: I stayed in local 146 for a while, another six months I would say. Then I got a withdrawal card. I just didn't continue going any more.

I did have contact with the members because they kept coming to my house asking questions about the union, about their work, and so on. For quite a while, for several years, I had contact with the members.

Ken: Why did you leave the local?

Kar: I wasn't working, so I felt it was futile for me to. I was not one of the working people and I was not working in the union. So what could I do? That was the reason I felt I should withdraw. And I got a withdrawal card.

Ken: Let's see. What have you done since then?

Kar: In 1960 was the year when the Women for Peace started a campaign against nuclear testing. So I joined the Women for Peace, although I was a member prior to that and the International League for Peace and Freedom. So I joined them in activity. And to such an extent that in 1962 I was elected as a delegate to Japan to the anti-war congress. I went to Japan and India. And I have been more or less working with them. Since then I have been

Kar: to amny other congresses and conferences for peace.

Lately now I have been working with the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Friendship Society.

Ken: Do you feel your peace work is just as imporant as your bnion work was?

Kar: In a way, yes. My feeling is that the union was important for the people here locally, to get them conditions, to get them wages. But when I am working for Women for Peace I feel that it is something that we all are worried about, the whole country. All countries are worried about what is going to happen because of the nuclear build up and so on. So I feel I am doing just as important, more important work than I had been doing. There it was more local work trying to get better conditions and and wo on. Peace is national and international work. It is for our future to see that our children and our grandchildren live in this nuclear age.

Ken: Do you work with pacifists.

Kar: No. Well to an extent. If they are doing good work we agree with them. Otherwise no.

Ken: Why wouldn't they be doing good work?

Kar: I believe they are. Actively no. I am not working with them.

Ken: What is the difference between your way of keeping the peace and the way in which the pacificts work?

Kar: I think our way is a little more political too. We attend various congresses and we bring out resolutions on how politically we could unite all the peace work and so on. The pacifists have an entirely different field of work. They don't need all that. It is enough just to be for peace, period.

Ken: I am trying to figure this out. I think I asked you this before, but are there any wars that are going on today that you agree are good wars; that are wars that you would not be against?

Kar: Yes. If it is a liberation war I would not be against it. If it is for any of the people who have been oppressed and are having their war of liberation, I would agree with it.

Ken: Then you are for peace on an international scale, but if it is a civil thing, you would agree with it if it were the oppressed against the oppressors?

Kar: Right.

Ken: On a national scale you disagree with all wars? I shouldn't put words in your mouth, but I am trying to figure out -

Kar: That's true.

Ken: Well, let me ask you this. Some people say the peace movement is one of middle class people. Is this so?

Kar: The women for peace group is more middle class women. I believe this is true. But from what I have seen and have been a member in going to meetings and so on, they are the educated women, former teachers, or present teachers, or the wives of professors, and that type of woman more or less, in my area at least. So I feel they are that type. However, generally speaking, when we organize a march for peace like they had in Washington, D.C. one time, it was more or less generally workers, the common people in the peace movement.

Ken: How do you get the common people involved?

Kar: Naturally through organizing them to come to a meeting, by talking to them, by having massmeetings.

Ken: Is this Women for Peace?

Kar: The Women for Peace do that. Other groups do that, the International League - any organization. For instance we have various organizations, women for peace and others, they all do the same type of peace work. As long as they are for peace and against nuclear war at the present time, or any war for that matter, we are with them.

Ken: How will you continue to work from now on?

Kar: I am more or less involved now with an organization called the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Friendship Society. And

Kar: that friendship organization or society has eleven branches throughout the United States and is a force which is working together with the U.S.S.R. in all phases of peace (what used to be called detente). So we are for that. And I am very happy to be with that group and working with that group now. Because if we don't have peace, with nuclear and all kinds of atomic weapons, we are certainly going to have the whole world on fire. So that's why I am happy to work with that group, feeling when we are at peace with each other we are going to hold the whole world in peace no matter what other countries do because both are powerful countries.

Ken: Do you want to say anything else about your peace work?

Kar: At the moment it is hard to say. Except that we do hope that - now I have heard on the radio that the U.S.S.R. is proposing, Mr. Breshnev is proposing, that we stop our nuclear testing. And I remember in 1960 when we started Women for Peace the biggest thing was the testing that we had in the air at that time when our milk for children was contaminated and the women were so scared that their babies will not grow up right in the start of a nuclear age. The same thing now with the testing, even underground testing. I think at one time it came out, as you know, in Nevada where the sheep were killed. And evidently people suffered too, although they don't know why they died and how much they suffered from that. Naturally if it reached sheep it must have reached some people too that were tending them or that were living in that area. And now I feel very very happy to hear that there is a proposal to stop entirely all testing of nuclear weapons.

Ken: There are a couple of minor questions I want to ask you. Did you ever have a very close woman friend?

Kar: Yes. I have a few, even now. We talk things over and we decide what we can do in the future possibly. How much we can bring out the groups we belong to. Like everybody has.

Ken: I mean, I have a friend, a girl friend who I can call and say, "Oh, my lord, I'm having trouble at home" or something like that. You worked so independently I wondered if you had -

Kar: Yes. I have a few that once in a while when I feel blue I call. I have a very good husband whom I can talk to. He is with me in all my work that I do. He agrees. And if he doesn't agree on something we talk it over and he finally sees my side or I see his side. We get along very nicely. But it isn't like having somebody of your own sex to talk to. And I do have several women that sometimes I feel, "Oh, I'm so blue", and I'll call them up. And we talk things over, and I go over there or they come over here. But I have very little time for socializing.

Ken: That's why I asked, because it seemed important to me.

Kar: You see I do some writing. And I belong to this organization now that takes a lot of my time.

Ken: There's one more personal question I want to ask. How did you feel when your daughter left home? We didn't discuss your daughter too much. I know she lived with you until she got married. Was it sort of a break when she left home?

Kar: Well, we had a bigger home, and she was the one that was working and put out the money to have it because she wanted her friends there. So we felt we couldn't keep that up any more.

Ken: I meant personally, about your daughter leaving your house.

Kar: When she left, I think my husband felt more than I did because I was out more and he was with her all the time while she was going to school. They used

Kar: to make their own meals when I was out to meetings. So he felt that she had passed away or something. That's the feeling he had. He couldn't go upstairs where her room was, and felt very bad. I felt bad too, naturally, but I was able more or less to realize the time had to come and it has come and she has left just like any bird leaves its nest.

Then it was sad to know that I couldn't even go down when she had her babies. I saw them a few years or a few months later. It made it sad because she lived so far away. But I was happy that she got someone that was from a nice family that we had known, and they are of the same type of work. I mean originally when they went to school. So that's how they got acquainted. And they are living very nicely. My grandchildren are grown up and in college.

Ken: You'll be a great grandmother soon.

Kar: I don't know.

End of tape

OK
12/16/77
SKB

Labor Women Series
California Historical Society

Interview: Sonia Baltrun Kaross

Date of Interview: Thursday, November 3, 1977, at home of
Mrs. Kaross, San Leandro, Calif.

Interviewer: Lucy Kendall

Transcriber: Lucy Kendall

Begin, Tape #14 - page 302 - counter #1

Anita Whitney

Ken: When did you first meet Anita Whitney?

Kar: I met Anita first, I think it was in 1930. And I met her at one of the places where we used to get together to speak about unemployment in those days because there was a lot of unemployment. And we used to gather on street corners. And Anita Whitney was speaking. And then later on we both were competing with each other on the soap box. And Anita always used to get off when she was finished and she would put her arms around me and say, "Which one of us spoke longest?" It was sort of a joke with us.

She was a very friendly person and she always used to say, "Now, you watch yourself. Don't get too tired." Because I had been doing something all day and in the evening we would have these meetings.

Then she invited me several times to her home. And she always had tea and cookies. And she always was very proud to say, "I baked them." The feeling I had towards her was like a personal friend.

And then we had various leaflets on unemployment. And she used to say, "I am going to take so many. How many are you going to take?" So we also competed who can distribute most of these leaflets. And she was so conscientious that the next day she would bring a little bunch back and say, "I wasn't quite able to give all of these away last night."

And every time I met her she had a pad and

Kaross and she wanted to know where it was best to go and talk to people. She was always talking to people about the conditions and about unemployment which she was very much interested in.

Then we had meetings, marches on the city hall for work or bread, or whatever it was called at that time. Anita was always at the head of a gropp and on the way she was step quickly from one side to the other with leaflets also. She never left without having a bunch of leaflets to distribute about a meeting that was being called or whether it was going to be some kind of a march, or whether it was just a leaflet on unemployment.

Then Anita would organize women, groups of women. She would invite them to her home. And several times I went there when she had maybe eight, nine, or even up to ten people in her home. And she would give them instructions on how they should work in the organizations that they belonged and spread the word on an unemployed procession or whether it was going to be unemployed or something of that sort.

Then she would tell us about the women suffrage movement. It was very interesting. She used to tell us how much she did, what she did, and how come she started organizing these women to make them understand how important it was that they were not subject to what a man had to say. They have to get up and say on their own.

Those few things were very dear to me and we were personal friends. And just before she passed away I had letters from her. And I hope I can find them. She used to write what she was still thinking. And when she reached her eightieth birthday I remember there was a party for her. But who gave it now I just don't remember who did. But it was a big party in a hall. I think it was in a Berkeley hall, probably it was called Friendship Hall in those days. And ~~there~~ there were various speakers. Anita burst into tears.

Kaross: She said, "That's enough about me." She said, "I'm eighty." I remember those words so well. She said, "I'm eighty and there isn't very much more that I can do on my two feet unless I sit home and do something. So why don't you people organize people like me to see what we can do after we've reached a certain age." She said that, and I'll never forget it, which made us all cry there in the hall. And I remember thinking that when I reach that age I hope I will be as brave as she was.

Ken: Do you remember that picture you gave me of a picture of you and Anita standing in a field with flowers in your hands. When was that?

Kar: That was taken during some kind of a meeting when we walked out, and somebody snapped a picture. What meeting I just don't remember. It was in San Francisco.

Ken: But you were standing in a field with flowers.

Kar: It was not a field. It was a garden of some kind. And I think that's where it was. We were all there. We were speaking there, Anna and myself and Dorothy. We were all speaking there for something or other. I don't remember what it was. And then we went outside. It wasn't a big hall. It was like a downstairs rumpus room, and then we walked out in the garden. As far as I remember, that was it.

Ken: What other things did you do with Anita?

Kar: We had various meetings. That's all I can say. We had personal meetings. She showed me a lot of her family pictures in her house, and she told me how she was arrested for Syndicalism, and how she had to leave. And at that time she was afraid that she would be in prison for a long time so she made a list of a lot of things. And she wanted some of those things to go to certain people that she loved. And now she's

Kar: enjoying them herself. And it is hard to remember everything, but I had a lot of long talks with her. She was well educated, as you know. I wasn't. So I gathered all that and there was just a beautiful bond between us. And I think other people said the same.

She sort of took me under her wing when I got here because I came from the East and I was more green here as to what was going on and she was guiding me.

Ken: Did she ever tell you why she never got married?

Kar: I didn't ask her. But I know that she felt sad one time. I remember that ~~when~~ she was showing me the pictures of her relatives, and the children, and I was looking at her book in her home, her photo book, she said "Well, I never married. Maybe I made a mistake. I would have had somebody now that would have been with me. I'm all alone." That's all she said. Why or what, I didn't dare ask her. She mentioned it herself. That's as far as I went.

Ken: She was a remarkable woman.

Kar: And you couldn't help loving her because she had such a sweet way of expressing herself. She could never hurt you, no matter what she said. And yet she was strict. She was very strict with the people when she was in charge of doing something like organizing a meeting. I remember her getting up and saying with all her strength and yet in a nice way, "Now this is no way. We are now going to reach anything with that. We have to do it like everybody else." In such a nice way that you couldn't get angry [laughter].

Ken: Do you remember - did she have any interests outside of changing the world?

Kar: I know she went to ballets in San Francisco,

Kar: and the opera. She liked those. She invited me several times, but I had no time. That I know she liked, but outside of that I don't think so.

Ken: What was her relationship with Gertrude Warwick?

Kar: The same way. Gertrude Warwick was older than she was, even. And she used to lecture her to not overdo, and do what she can, and what she can't, to do it by telephone or whatever, Warwick and I went to visit her one time when she was ill. She was ill one time, but this was not the time she passed away. Gertrude and I went over to see her, and she said, "Now you were lecturing me. Here I am on my feet and you are sick in bed." Gertrude was a very fine woman too; a very fine, very conscientious woman.

Any-

~~xxxxxxx~~ thing I wanted to talk about that I didn't understand, or I thought I didn't understand - whether it was about the women's movement or about or things in general, I had nobody else to go to. I did go to Anita. And I used to get all the answers from her. She gave me the answers on any question that I asked her. I strictly abided by them because I thought she knew everything. That's the feeling I had towards her, that she knew everything. I knew that she was well educated and didn't mind the people that were not. She was able, and had patience to talk to them.

Ken: What kind of a speaker was she?

Kar: She was not what you would say a fiery speaker. She spoke in a calm voice. She did raise it a little bit when it was necessary. But every word that she said had facts, and she knew what she was talking about. She didn't have any idle words. That's the way I felt.

Everybody listened. When Anita got up, the

Kar: hall was hushed. And I heard her quite a few times, speaking in a hall.

Ken: Would you consider her a feminist of her day?

Kar: No, I wouldn't. Somehow I wouldn't. When she did speak for the women, even though she spoke On International Women's Day, she spoke that women should be equal. But not from the feminist point of view. Not that the women should be the top, or whatever. No, she was not a feminist, not the way I understand feminism.

Ken: Did she address herself to women's problems?

Ken: Yes she did. She brought out how the women of our age, while they progressed quite a bit, they were still lacking in a lot of understanding and feeling that they are downtrodden. That should not be the feeling. They should rise above that. That's what she brought out to the women in speaking.

Ken: There was a feeling at one time that women were doubly exploited, one because they were women and two because they were a worker.

Kar: I don't remember bringing it up that way. But she did bring out that just because you are a woman you shouldn't feel that you want the men to kiss your hand and all that. "That's not what we are looking for", she said. "We are looking for equality on all bases, but not just because we are women, that we are to have our hands kissed." I remember that expression. These gentlemen/^{so-called} that used to kiss the women's hands. They do that even now in Europe today. European men come over here, and they grab your hand and kiss it. Well, she didn't believe in that. She said that we had to be for full equality and understanding that we are not above them and not below them. We are equal.

Kar; Equal in every way.

Ken: Did she ever tell you any of her experiences as a suffragette?

Kar: She did say how, at times, the kids used to tease her. The kids in the neighborhood, they would follow her and tease her about being a suffragette. I forgot what words she used. They couldn't express themselves. They didn't understand what suffrage meant, and they called her a woman lover or something like that. I forgot the words she said. But the kids used to pursue her to her house if she walked at that time and they used to throw all kinds of epithets at her.

There are so many things that we talked about that it's awfully hard to remember. Once in a while when I am doing something, or speaking, or going to some kind of a meeting and hearing things I would remember what Anita said. She is the only one that sticks more than anybody else from what she said.

Ken: Did she ever talk to you about what happened after the women got the vote?

Kar: She said one time - she spoke, I think, at one of the meetings that she was disappointed that we didn't give the women more understanding; that once they got their suffrage they thought that that was it. And that's all they wanted, and that was wrong. And she was very much disappointed after women got the suffrage. She spoke at one of the meetings especially on that, on women after suffrage. And that was her gist that the women didn't want anything else, that they were happy to have the man tell them who to vote for, and that was it. And she said that was not right. The women should have been educated enough - how hard we fought for it, and after we got it they should have known what to do with it better.

Kar: I can't tell the exact words, but something along that line. She made a whole speech one time. Whether it was International Women's Day or some other day that she had a talk on women, and she brought that out, how disappointed she was, and many other women who had worked so hard for women's suffrage.

Ken: Well, if I think of a series of questions I'll come back and ask them. I just wondered what she was like as a fellow worker to you.

Kar: I haven't had another one like her - never met another like her.

Ken: You kept up your friendship with her until she passed away?

Kar: All the time. She called me sometimes, and I would call her on the phone and we would have a conversation. I never went to San Francisco because the phones were - I always talked to her.

We have never had another woman like her since that I can compare with Anita.

Ken: Thank you. I guess that does it.

End of Interview

11/77

Typed addition to interview of Sonia Baltrun Kaross
submitted by Mrs. Kaross to Lucy Kendall

Anita Whitney

Anita often teasingly would say that she is unofficial godmother to many girls. When she worked in Charities and Public Welfare League those she came into contact with just adored her and therefore many black and white girl babies those days were named after her . . Anita.

* * *

When we were scheduled to speak at a well advertised meetings, it is then that I felt I was inadequate because of my lack of education, she would sense and understand my feeling of nervousness. Then she would come and pat me on the back and say "you are going to speak on what you know and feel, so tell them."

Correction

Courtesy of James A. Cavanaugh, TWUA Oral History Project

The chronology on textile unions is:

United Textile Workers formed in 1901.

CIO's Textile Workers Organizing Committee formed in 1937 and virtually swallowed the UTW; in 1939 Francis Gorman led a small splinter of UTW locals out of the TWOC and back into the AFL, retaining the name of UTW which exists even today. In response, the new TWOC locals and the old UTW locals, which were still part of the CIO and TWOC, held concurrent conventions in May 1939, dissolved, and formed Textile Workers Union of America.

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